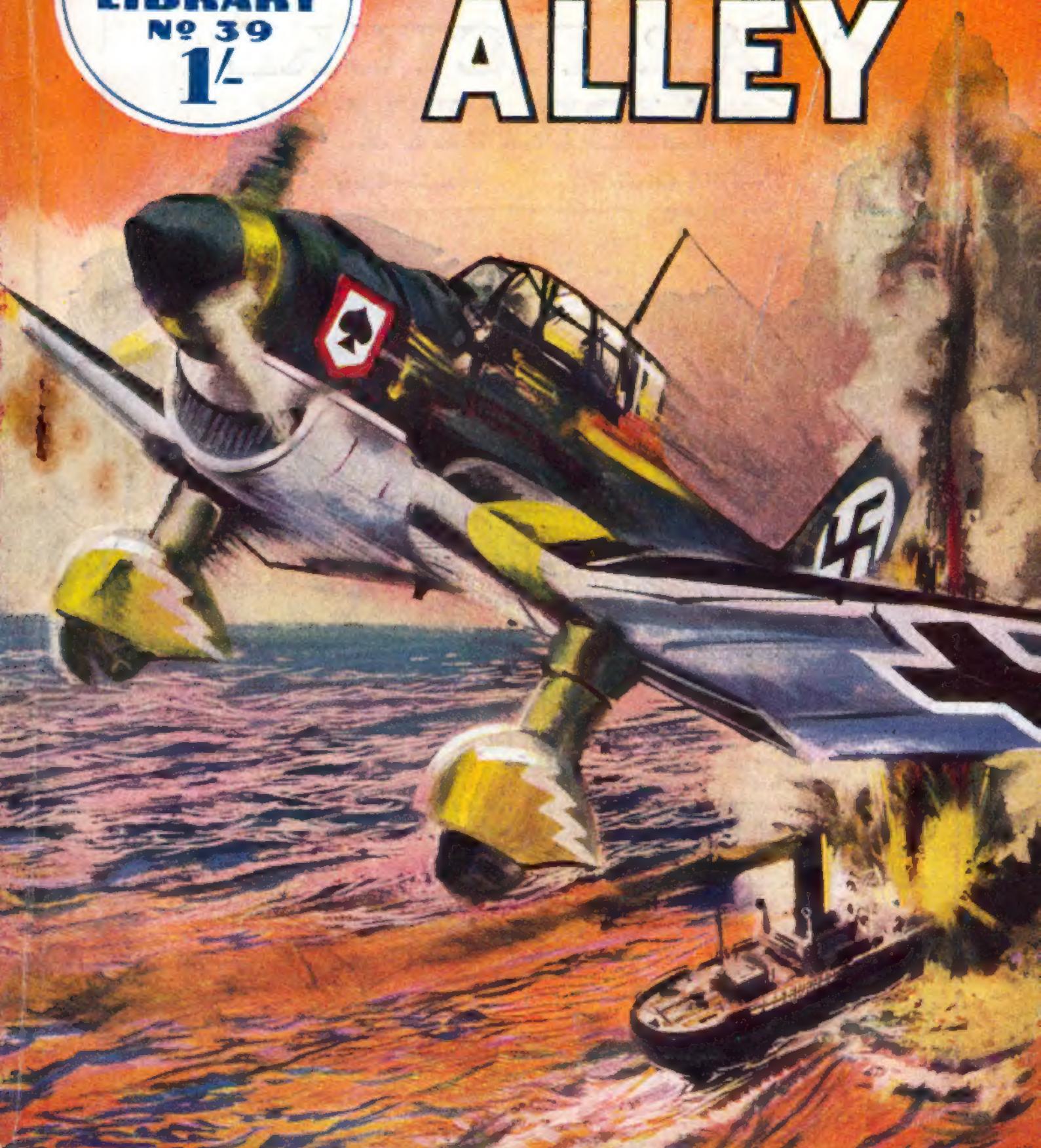


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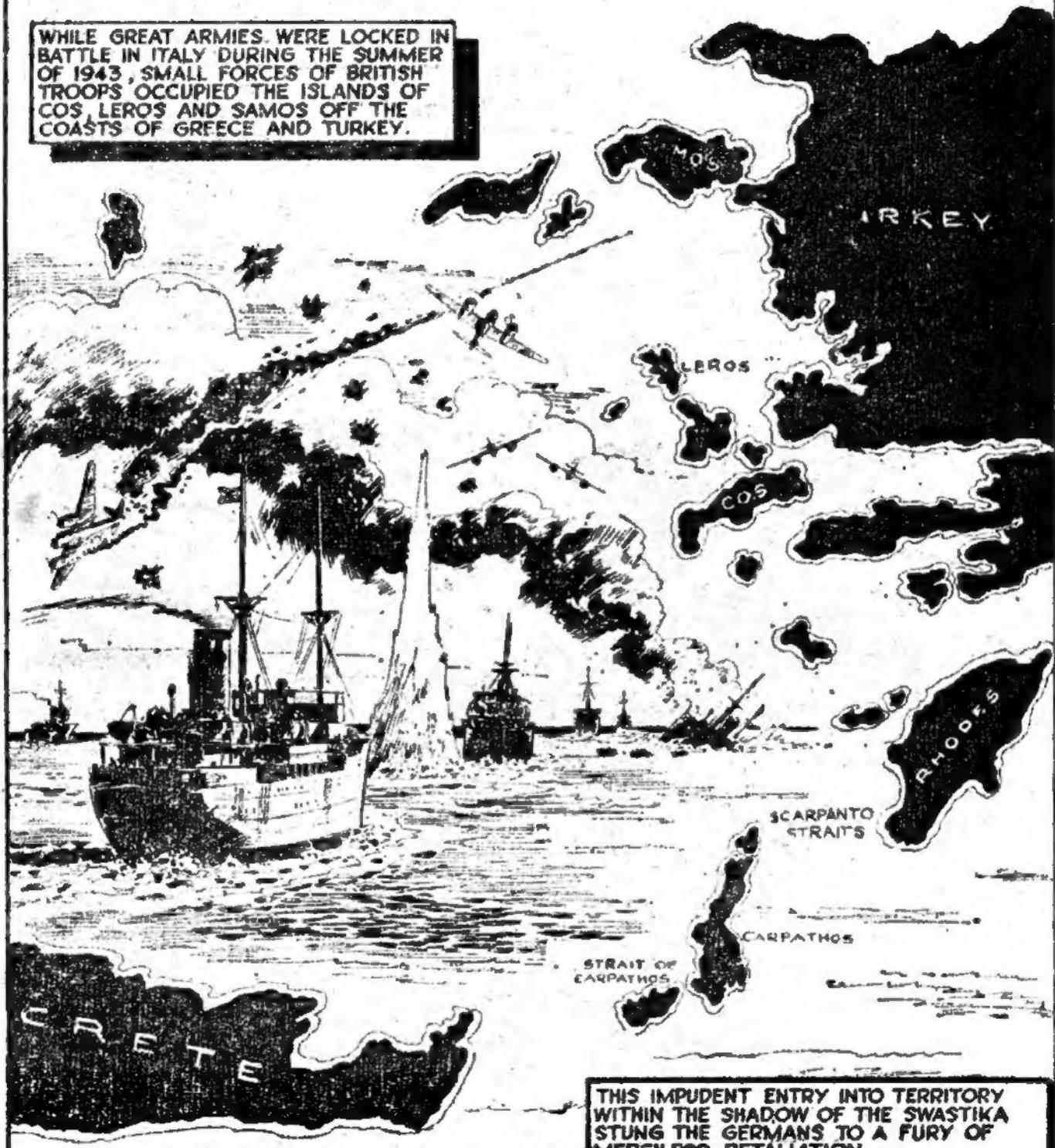
Operating three hundred miles within enemy territory, the Long Range Desert Group found that discipline and daring mixed well together, creating a force that could crack the enemy's toughest defences.

No. 42—PHANTOM FORCE FIVE

**No. 43—THREE... TWO...
ONE... ZERO!**

BOMB ALLEY

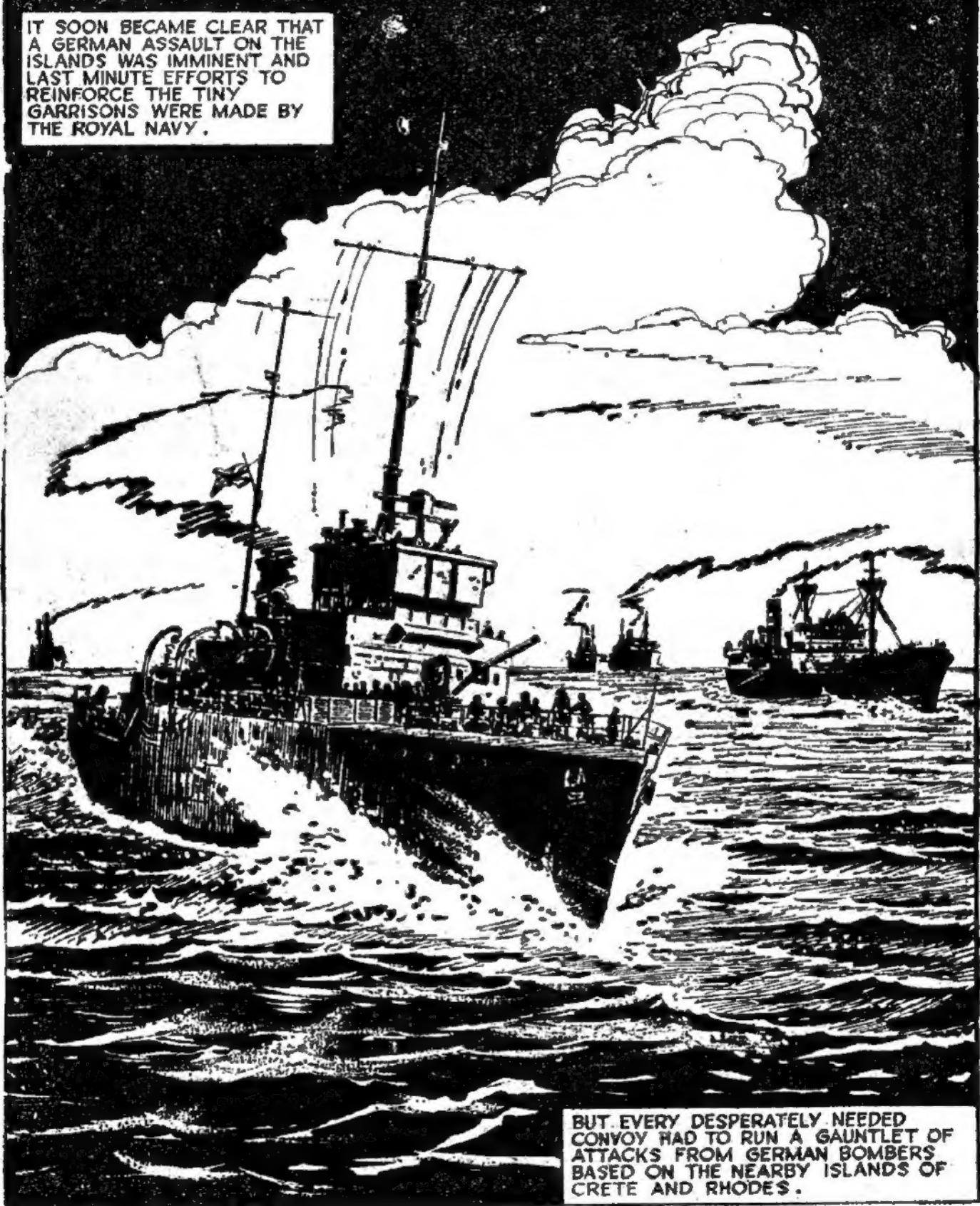
WHILE GREAT ARMIES WERE LOCKED IN BATTLE IN ITALY DURING THE SUMMER OF 1943, SMALL FORCES OF BRITISH TROOPS OCCUPIED THE ISLANDS OF COS, LEROS AND SAMOS OFF THE COASTS OF GREECE AND TURKEY.



THIS IMPUDENT ENTRY INTO TERRITORY WITHIN THE SHADOW OF THE SWASTIKA STUNG THE GERMANS TO A FURY OF MERCILESS RETALIATION.

Chapter 1. RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

IT SOON BECAME CLEAR THAT A GERMAN ASSAULT ON THE ISLANDS WAS IMMINENT AND LAST MINUTE EFFORTS TO REINFORCE THE TINY GARRISONS WERE MADE BY THE ROYAL NAVY.

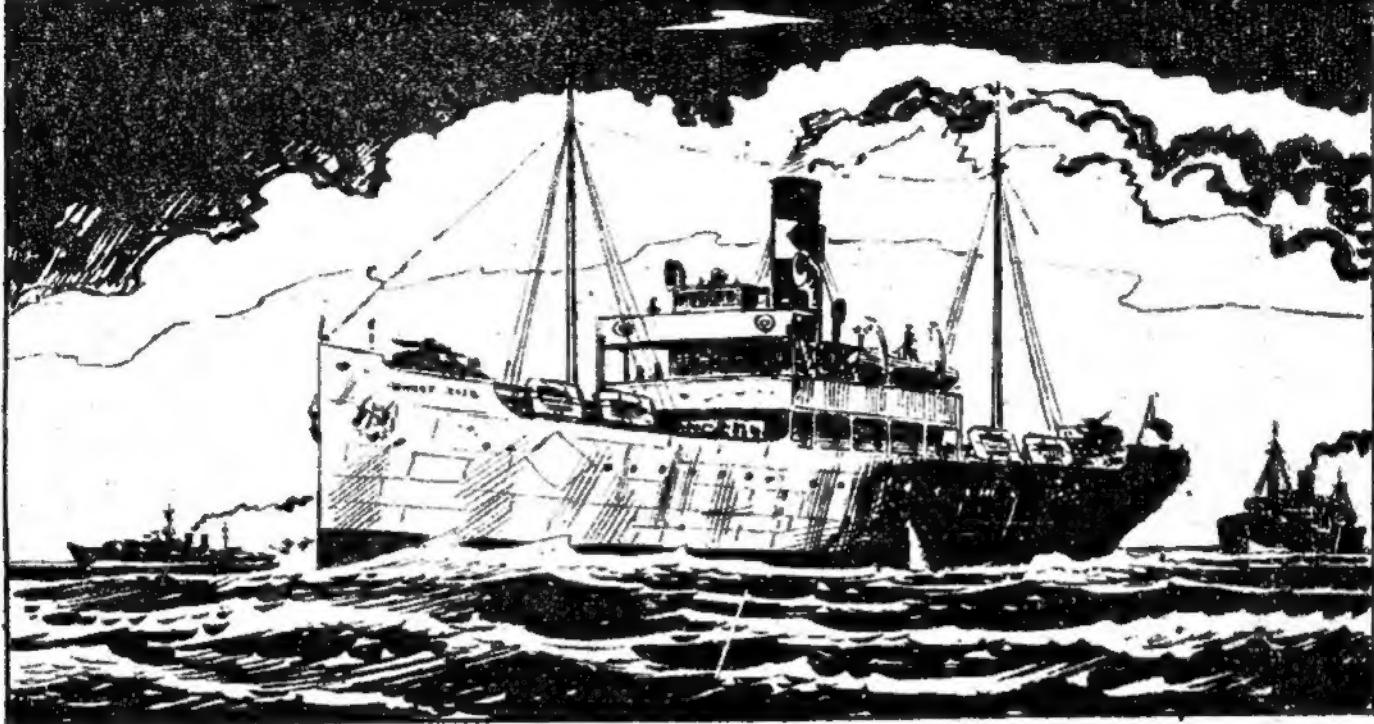


BUT EVERY DESPERATELY NEEDED CONVOY HAD TO RUN A GAUNTLET OF ATTACKS FROM GERMAN BOMBERS BASED ON THE NEARBY ISLANDS OF CRETE AND RHODES.

Bomb Alley

3

IN ONE OF THOSE CONVOYS WAS THE S.S. ROMNEY ROSE, AN ELDERLY SHORT-SEA TRADER IN PEACETIME, WHO HAD PROVED HERSELF A LADY EVEN IF A TRAMP. HER WAR RECORD WAS LONG AND LEGENDARY. HER WOUNDS HAD BEEN MASSIVE BUT NEVER MORTAL. TWICE SHE HAD BEEN MOURNED FOR SUNK, AND TWICE SURVIVED. THIRD TIME UNLUCKY, SAID THE SUPERSTITIOUS.



HER MASTER, TOM HALLAM, WAS NOT SUPERSTITIOUS. HE JUST KNEW THAT THE ROMNEY ROSE HAD A WILL TO LIVE.



THIS THOUGHT GAVE HIM A STRANGE COMFORT, FOR HE HAD A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY. IN HER AGEING HOLDS THE SHIP CARRIED AMMUNITION AND SOLDIERS OF A COUNTY REGIMENT CROWDED HER PATCHED DECKS.

Bomb Alley



Bomb Alley

5

ON THE ROMNEY ROSE AND EVERY SHIP IN THEIR CONVOY, LOOKOUTS WERE DOUBLY ALERT. EACH MAN KNEW THAT FROM OUT OF THAT DARKENING SKY THE DEADLY STUKA DIVE-BOMBERS WOULD ATTACK . . . SOON !



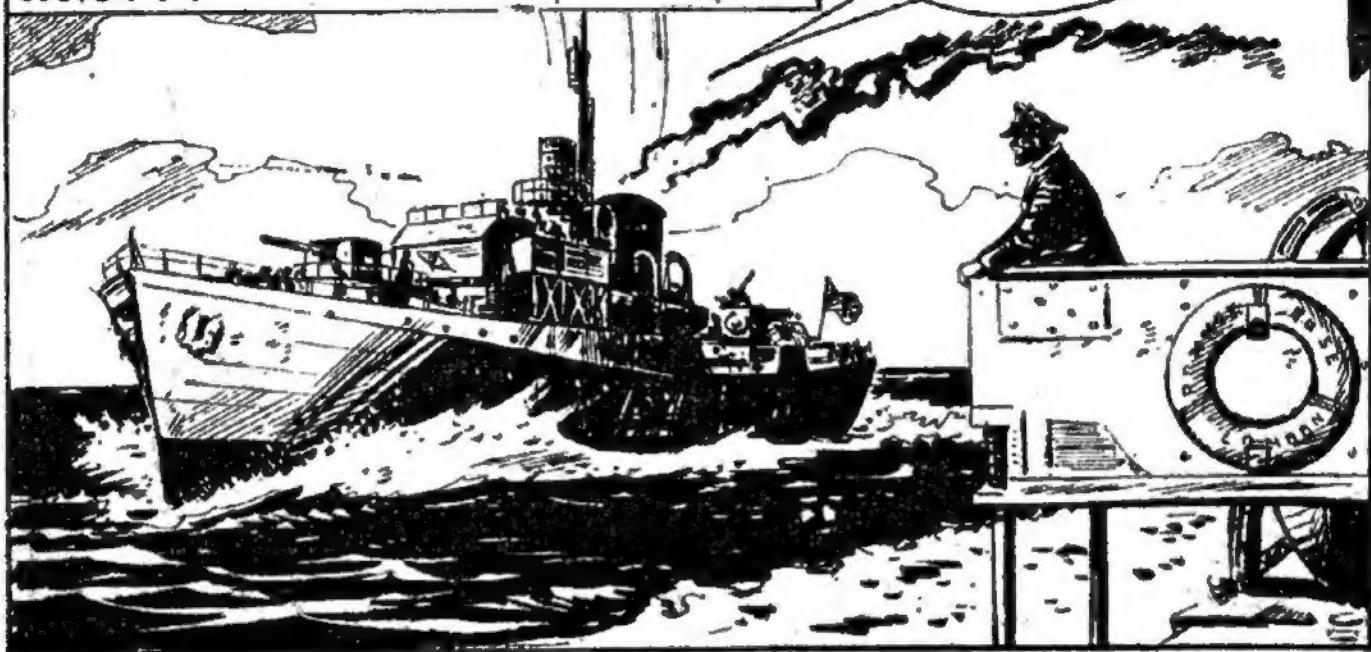
DOWN IN THE VETERAN FREIGHTER'S ENGINE ROOM, 'TUFFY' TAYLOR THE CHIEF ENGINEER, CURSED HIS ANCIENT CHARGE IN THE SAME BREATH THAT HE DEFENDED IT. . . FOR FEAR OF OFFENDING THE OLD LADY AS HE PUT IT, FOR THE BURLY ENGINEER, TOO, HAD A LONG-STANDING REGARD FOR THE GALLANT, CREAKING OLD HULK . . .



Bomb Alley

LEFT ALONE ON THE BRIDGE, BILL PACKER WATCHED WITH HALF-ENVIOUS EYES THE DARTING APPROACH OF A NAVAL CORVETTE. WITH A SMART FLICK OF ITS STERN IT CLOSED THE ROMNEY ROSE AND THE VOICE OF ITS YOUNG COMMANDER HAILED THEM WITH CHEERFUL GUSTO . . .

AHOY,
ROMNEY ROSE!
IS THAT THE BEST THAT
AUNTIE CAN DO?



BILL STIFFENED AT THIS SLIGHTING REFERENCE . . .

DO YOU WANT
ME TO BUST
HER BOILERS?



FROM THE BRIDGE OF THE CORVETTE, LIEUTENANT J.D. KEYNES, OF THE ROYAL NAVAL VOLUNTEER RESERVE STARED BACK AT THE TRAMP STEAMER AND SIGHED. IT WAS HIS DUTY TO BRING UP THE REAR OF THIS CONVOY AND, CLEARLY, THE ROMNEY ROSE WAS NOT TO BE HURRIED.

THAT OLD
CRATE'S GOING
TO GIVE US TROUBLE
IF SHE CAN'T PICK
UP A BIT.



SO THAT'S
THE ROMNEY
ROSE! SHE'S A BIT
OF A CHARACTER,
I'VE HEARD.

BILL HAD BANDED WORDS TOO OFTEN WITH THESE WITTY YOUNG R.N.V.R. COMMANDERS TO LET IT WORRY HIM. TRUE, THEY WERE MOSTLY HIS OWN AGE, BUT HE DEEMED THEM JUNIOR STUFF COMPARED WITH HIS OWN LONG MERCHANT TRAINING.

LIEUTENANT KEYNES' USUAL HIGH SPIRITS WERE SOMEWHAT CLOUDED BY THE THOUGHT OF HIS TWIN DUTIES . . .

HALF SPEED AHEAD!



FIRST HE HAD TO ESCORT THE LAST OF THIS CONVOY THROUGH THE SCARPANTO STRAITS IN THE HOURS OF DARKNESS, AND THEN TO PUT ASHORE ON THE ISLAND OF COS THE TROOPS THAT LITTERED HIS DECKS .

BY THE TIME THE DREAD SCARPANTO STRAITS WERE REACHED, THE ROMNEY ROSE WAS TRAILING WELL ASTERN WITH THE CORVETTE DARTING TO AND FRO LIKE A WORRIED SHEEPDOG. A BRIGHT MOON HAD DISPERSED THE FRIENDLY DARK, BUT STILL THE THREATENED AIR ATTACK HAD NOT COME.



Bomb Alley

THEN SUDDENLY, FROM WELL AHEAD, CAME THE UNMISTAKABLE DIN OF AN AIR-SEA BATTLE . . .



THE CORVETTE SHOT AHEAD AS IF STUNG, LEAVING THE ROMNEY ROSE TO PLOD ON.

EVERY GUN ABOARD THE CORVETTE WAS BANGING SKYWARDS AS IT SURGED INTO THE THICK OF THE FRAY. THE SKY WAS LACED WITH WHITE-HOT TRACER AND STUDDED WITH SHELL BURSTS BUT THE ENEMY BOMBERS PRESSED RELENTLESSLY IN TO THE ATTACK.



Bomb Alley

THOSE ABOARD THE *ROMNEY ROSE* WATCHING THE DISTANT CONFLICT HAD THEIR ATTENTION CLAWED BRUTALLY UPWARD AS THE SUDDEN SPINE-CHILLING SCREAM OF A STUKA DIVE-BOMBER RENT THE AIR ABOVE THEIR HEADS.



ACTION SWIFT AND INEVITABLE, FOLLOWED. A HUNDRED OR MORE RIFLES WERE AIMED AT THE PLANE AND THEIR CRACKLING FUSILLADE MINGLED WITH THE SPIRITED BARK OF THE 40 MM. BOFORS INTO A DEAFENING CRESCENDO.

Bomb Alley

IN RESPONSE TO TOM HALLAM'S ORDER, THE ROMNEY ROSE BEGAN TO LURCH OFF COURSE BUT THE NEXT SECOND, THE SKIPPER COLLAPSED WITH A GROAN AS AN UNSEEN JU-88 SKIMMED IN AT MASTHEAD HEIGHT AND PUMPED A STREAM OF CANNON SHELL AT THE SHIP.



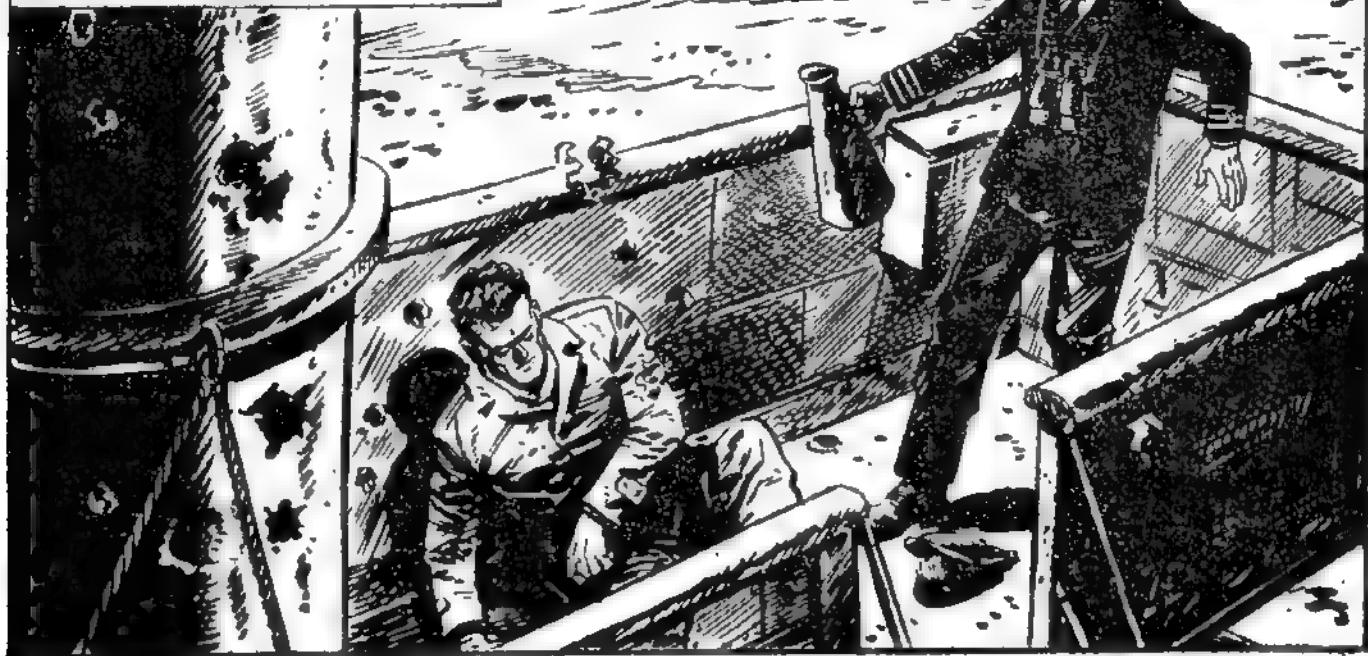
THE SCREECHING WHISTLE OF THE PLUMMETING BOMBS AND THE THUNDER OF THE BOMBERS' ENGINES DROWNED ALL ELSE. FOUR COLUMNS OF WATER BURST OUT OF THE SEA CLOSE TO THE SHIP'S SIDE.



BUT THE STUKA, FRANTICALLY DRAGGING ITSELF OUT OF ITS DIVE BECAME MORTALLY SAVAGED BY THAT CONCENTRATED FIRE FROM THE ROMNEY ROSE.

AS THE SOLDIERS SILENTLY WATCHED THE STUKA TAKE ITS DEATH-DIVE, BILL TURNED TO DISCOVER TOM HALLAM HUDDLED AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE BRIDGE.

TOM!



AN ARMY DOCTOR EXAMINED THE UNCONSCIOUS SHIP'S CAPTAIN.



BILL CLIMBED THOUGHTFULLY BACK TO THE BRIDGE AFTER EXCHANGING A FEW CHEERFUL WORDS WITH THE JUBILANT SOLDIERS. HE WAS GRIMLY AWARE THAT HE WAS NOW IN COMMAND. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GETTING THIS OLD BOAT AND THE TROOPS TO THE ISLAND WAS NOW ALL HIS.





BILL'S RETORT WAS DROWNED IN A HOWL OF INDIGNATION AS HIS SOLDIER PASSENGERS PROUDLY INFORMED THE GRINNING NAVY OF THEIR OWN SUCCESS AGAINST THE ENEMY.

GARN! WE SHOT OFF OUR PIECE TOO, MATE!

YUS, WHILE YOU WAS FIDDLED ABOUT UP THE STREET!

GOT A FLIPPIN' STUKA, WE DID.

BILL SHOUTED HIS BAD NEWS ABOUT TOM HALLAM. AFTER A BRIEF PARLEY IT WAS DECIDED TO LEAVE THE WOUNDED SKIPPER WHERE HE WAS . . .

WITH A CHEERY WAVE, KEYNES SURGED OFF TO QUARTER THE REAR OF THE CONVOY . . . ALL VERY DASHING AND SELF-CONFIDENT.

I COULD TAKE YOUR SKIPPER ABOARD AND WHIP HIM TO COS, BUT MY ORDERS ARE TO KEEP WITH STRAGGLERS AND, BY CRACKY, OLD AUNTIE ROSE CERTAINLY IS A STRAGGLER.

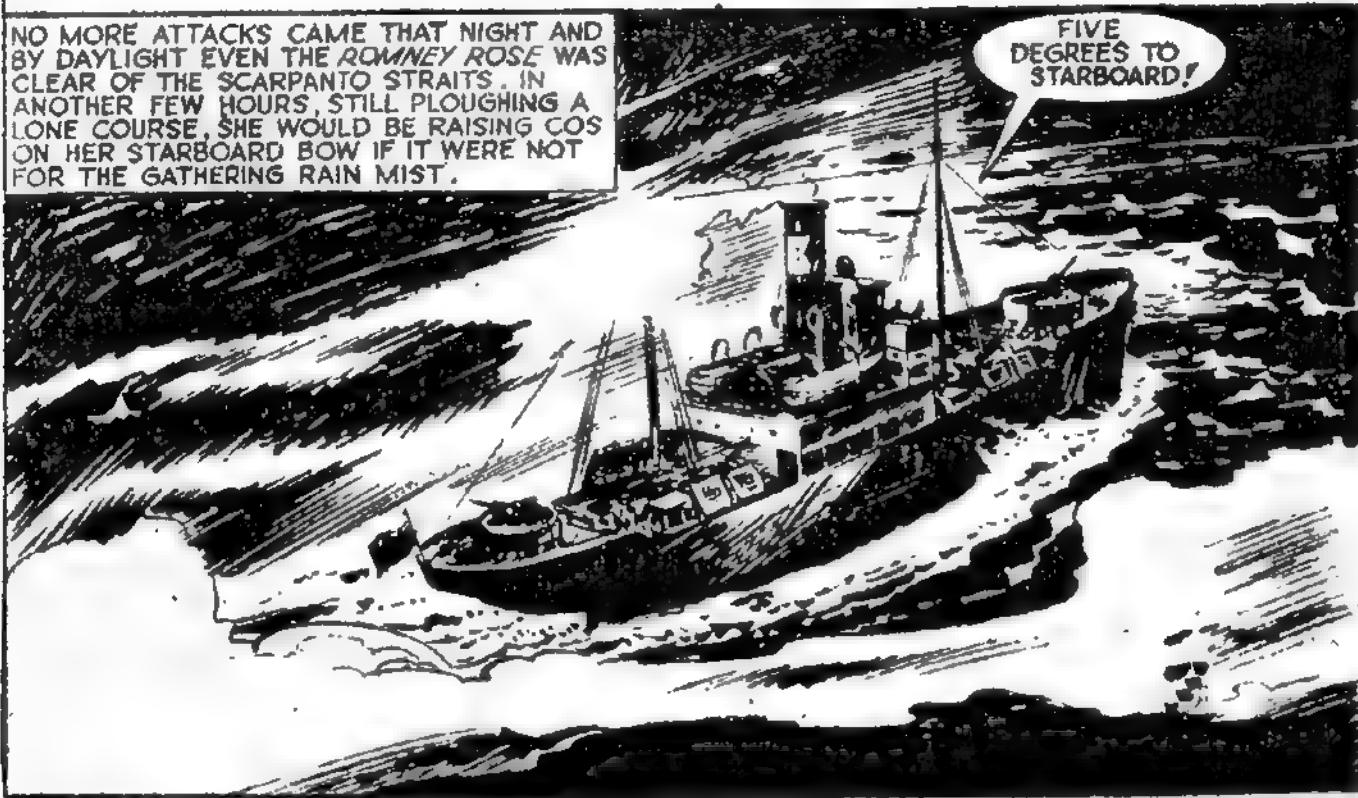
PRESS ON, AUNTIE ROSE! YOU'LL GET THERE YET!

Chapter 2.

FIRE BELOW

NO MORE ATTACKS CAME THAT NIGHT AND BY DAYLIGHT EVEN THE ROMNEY ROSE WAS CLEAR OF THE SCARPANTO STRAITS. IN ANOTHER FEW HOURS, STILL PLOUGHING A LONE COURSE, SHE WOULD BE RAISING COS ON HER STARBOARD BOW IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE GATHERING RAIN MIST.

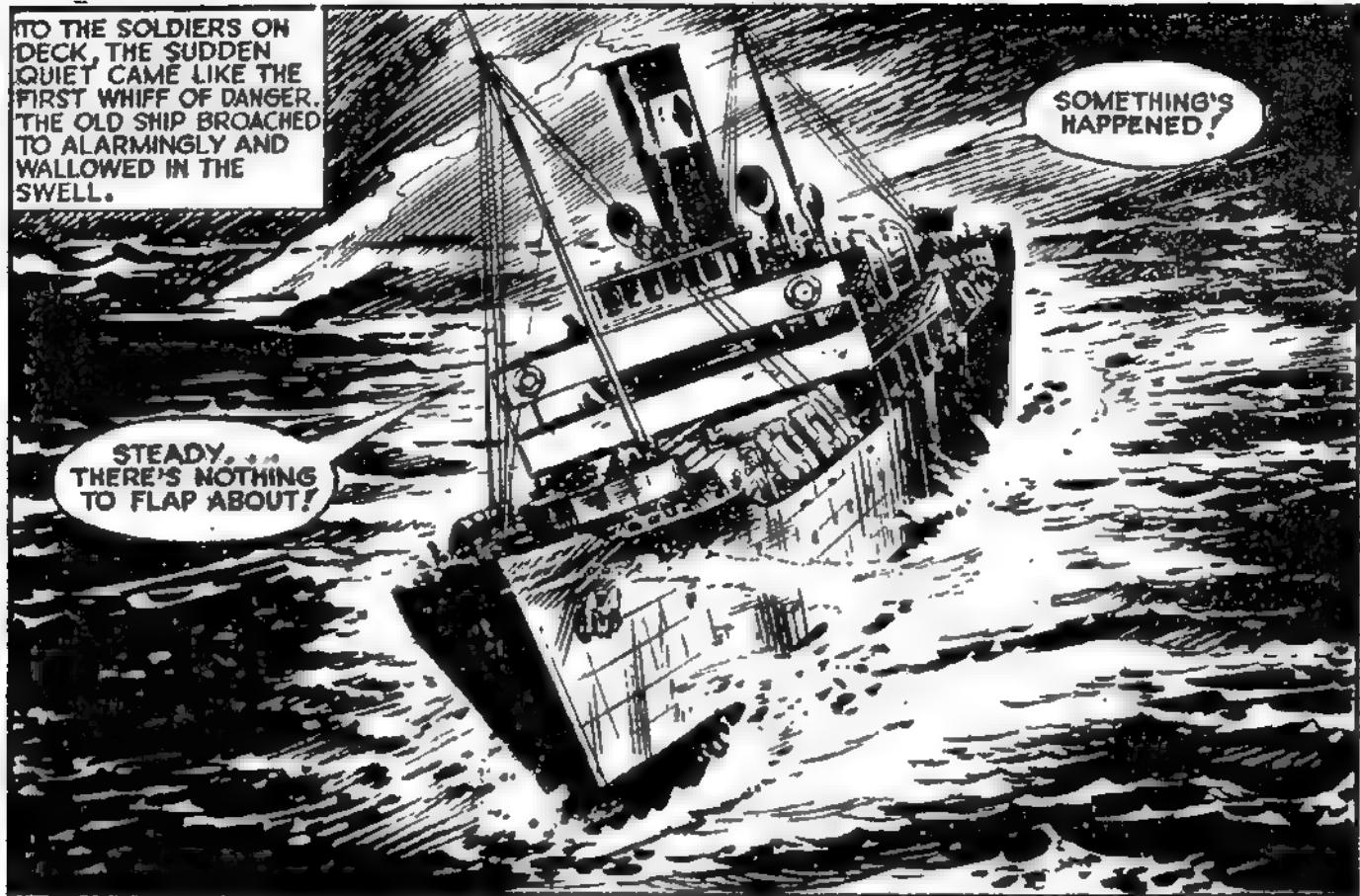
FIVE
DEGREES TO
STARBOARD!



IT WAS THEN THAT THE EVIL WHICH CHIEF ENGINEER TUFFY TAYLOR HAD SO LONG FEARED CAME UPON HIM. THE ROMNEY ROSE DEVELOPED ENGINE TROUBLE. IN FACT SHE STOPPED ALTOGETHER.

LUMME...
SHE'S STOPPED!





BILL SCRAMBLED ON DECK WITH THOUGHTS OF STEADYING THE WALLOWING SHIP WITH A SEA-ANCHOR. THEN TO HIS RELIEF HE SAW THE CORVETTE APPEAR OUT OF THE MIST AS IF BY MAGIC.

GOSH! THAT FELLER MIGHT BE A WISE-CRACKING CIVVY IN A SAILOR SUIT, BUT HE'S ALL THERE!



AHOY,
ROMNEY ROSE,
SOMETHING
WRONG?

WHEN HE HEARD THE TROUBLE, KEYNES' FLOW OF RUEFUL WITTICISMS SO GRATED ON THE WORRIED BILL THAT HIS APPROVAL OF THE YOUNG NAVAL SKIPPER SOON GAVE WAY AGAIN TO HIS OLD INTOLERANCE.



DEAR OH DEAR!
WOT... RUN OUT
OF BICYCLE
CHAIN?

FOR ALL HIS QUIPS, KEYNES SWIFTLY GOT A HAWSER ABOARD THE ROMNEY ROSE AND TOOK HER IN TOW. BILL FROWNED AS HE WATCHED THE NAVY MAN SET ABOUT HIS TRICKY TASK AS IF IT WERE ALL TREMENDOUS FUN.



HERE WE GO,
ROMNEY ROSE,
HOLD ON TO
YOUR HATS!

THAT CHAP'S
TOO FUNNY FOR
MY LIKING!

BILL WAS NOT SURE HE APPROVED OF SUCH A LIGHT-HEARTED APPROACH TO TROUBLE AT SEA, ESPECIALLY WITH THE OLD ROMNEY ROSE HAVING A HEART ATTACK... .MAYBE A FATAL ONE.

CALLING FOR A RELIEF HAND, BILL SLIPPED BELOW TO HAVE A LOOK AT TOM, WHO HAD BEEN MADE COMFORTABLE BY THE ARMY DOCTOR.

I CAN'T STAY HERE BILL. YOU'RE IN TROUBLE

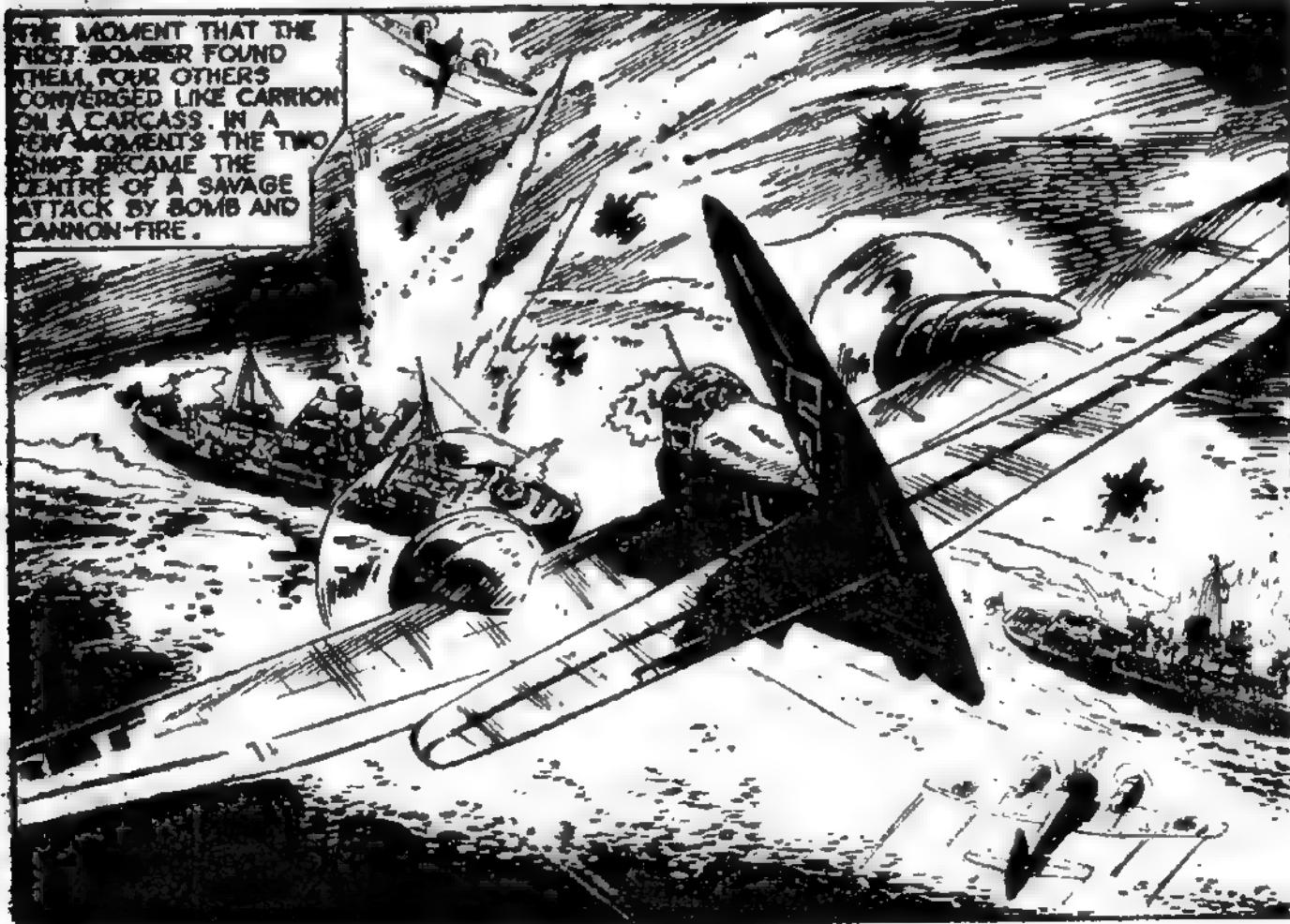
HE'S IN NO CONDITION TO LEAVE HIS BUNK.

DON'T WORRY, TOM. THE TOW'S GOING FINE. NOTHING FOR YOU TO DO.

BUT A SPITEFUL FATE INTERVENED. A GERMAN GUNBOAT APPEARED OUT OF THE MIST AND SENT TWO SHELLS SCREAMING TOWARDS THE CORVETTE BEFORE HER GUN COULD BE BROUGHT TO BEAR.

STARBOARD TWENTY! RANGE FOUR FIFTY!

Bomb Alley



THE GUNBOAT IMMEDIATELY TURNED BACK INTO THE MIST AND EVERYONE KNEW THEN WHAT TO EXPECT...THE ENEMY WOULD RADIO THEIR POSITION. SURE ENOUGH, FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, A JUNKERS 88 BOMBER CIRCLED THE TWO SHIPS.

Bomb Alley

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BOTH SHIPS RETALIATED WITH A FURIOUS CLOSE BARRAGE. THE CORVETTE, WITH HER MULTIPLE MACHINE GUNS AND THUDDING POM-POMS, WAS SOON WREATHED IN HER OWN BATTLE-SMOKE.



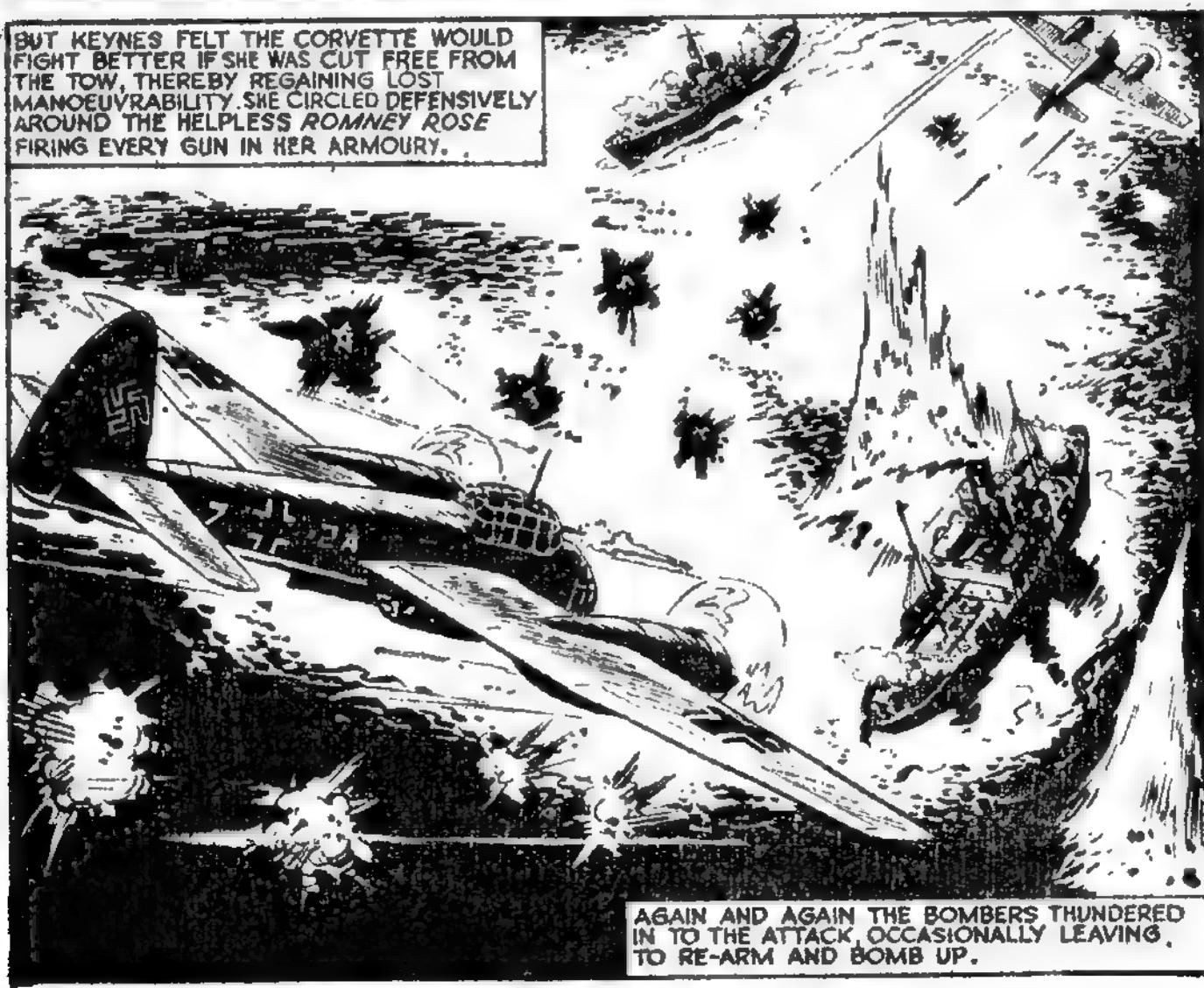
Bomb Alley

DESPITE THE CONFUSION OF THE AIR ATTACK, BILL SUDDENLY BECAME AWARE OF AN UNEASY SLEWING ACTION OF THE DECK BEHIND HIM. HE GASPED WHEN HE REALISED THAT THE CORVETTE HAD CAST THEM OFF!



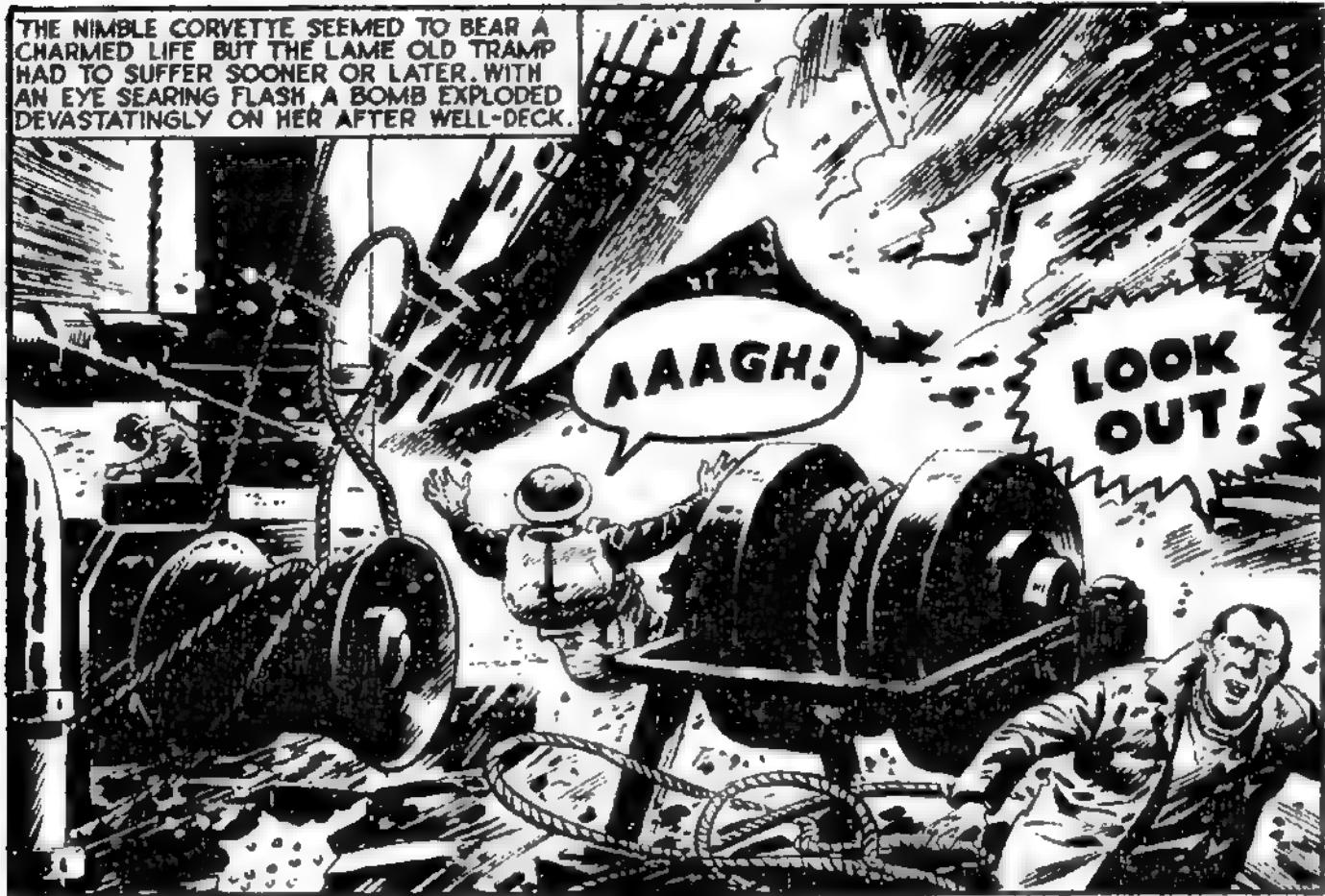
CONFOUND THAT KEYNES! THIS MAKES US A SITTING DUCK FOR SURE!

BUT KEYNES FELT THE CORVETTE WOULD FIGHT BETTER IF SHE WAS CUT FREE FROM THE TOW, THEREBY REGAINING LOST MANOEUVRABILITY. SHE CIRCLED DEFENSIVELY AROUND THE HELPLESS ROMNEY ROSE FIRING EVERY GUN IN HER ARMOURY.



AGAIN AND AGAIN THE BOMBERS THUNDERED IN TO THE ATTACK OCCASIONALLY LEAVING TO RE-ARM AND BOMB UP.

THE NIMBLE CORVETTE SEEMED TO BEAR A CHARMED LIFE BUT THE LAME OLD TRAMP HAD TO SUFFER SOONER OR LATER. WITH AN EYE SEARING FLASH A BOMB EXPLODED DEVASTATINGLY ON HER AFTER WELL-DECK.



A GREAT JAGGED HOLE WAS GOUGED OUT OF THE DECK AND SMOKE AND FLAME BELCHED UPWARDS. WITH TUFFY TAYLOR AT THEIR HEAD, THE CREW DASHED FORWARD WITH THE HOSES.



Bomb Alley



THEN, AS IF FATE HAD RELENTED, THERE CAME THE WELCOME SIGHT OF FRIENDLY FIGHTERS FROM COS AIRFIELD, SUMMONED BY THE CORVETTE'S RADIO. THE AVENGING WHINE OF THESE STREAKING HURRICANES SOUNDED TO THE SOREL-TRIED MEN LIKE THE SWEETEST MUSIC.

LOOK!
HURRICANES!

UP THE
RAF'S

THE FIGHTERS OVERHAULED THE FLEEING ENEMY PLANES AND MERCILESSLY HARRIED THEM IN AND OUT OF CLOUD, UNTIL ONLY ONE ESCAPED TO TAKE HOME THE TALE.

EVAC

Bomb Alley

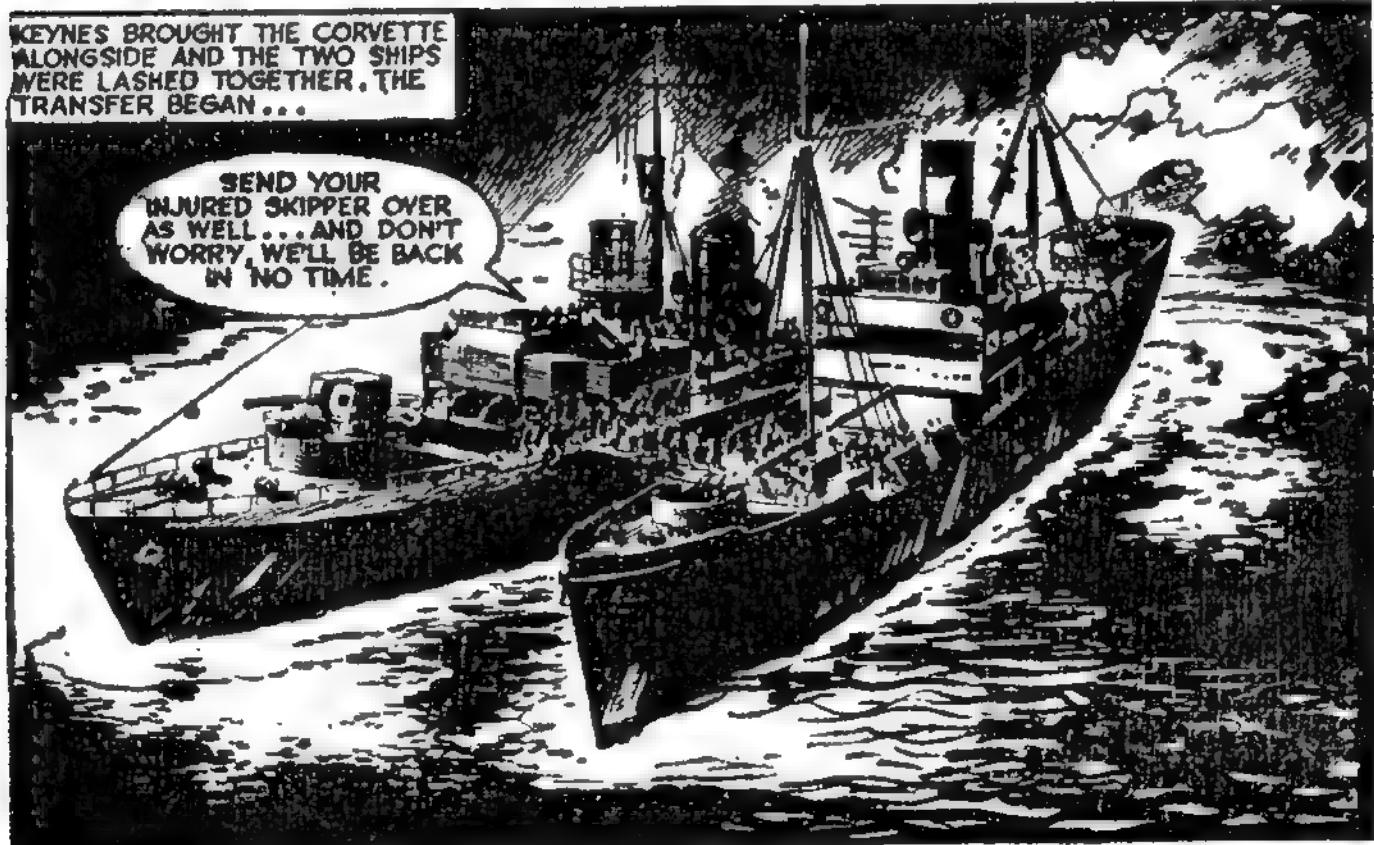
THE MOMENT THE SKIES WERE CLEARED OF ENEMY PLANES, THE CORVETTE CAME ALONGSIDE THE 'ROMNEY ROSE', HER COMMANDER GAUGING THE EXTENT OF THE FIRE.



BUT THE NAVAL MAN HAD JUST RECEIVED AN URGENT WARNING OF AN ENEMY ATTACK ON THE ISLAND.



KEYNES BROUGHT THE CORVETTE ALONGSIDE AND THE TWO SHIPS WERE LASHED TOGETHER. THE TRANSFER BEGAN...





Bomb Alley



Bomb Alley

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EVERY EYE TURNED TO THE NEW SKIPPER. HIS WAS THE DECISION. WAS THIS THE MOMENT TO ABANDON SHIP... TO ABANDON THE GALLANT OLD ROMNEY ROSE.



TORN BY CONFLICTING EMOTIONS, BILL GAVE THE MOST DREADED ORDER AT SEA . . .

ABANDON SHIP! AWAY BOATS!



Bomb Alley

THERE WAS A SWIFT YET ORDERLY "AWAY BOATS" AND SOON BILL FOUND HIMSELF THE LAST SOUL ABOARD THE STRICKEN SHIP. THEN A CRACKLE OF EXPLDING .303 AMMUNITION CAME FROM BELOW DECKS . . . AND BILL WAITED FOR NO MORE .



BILL DROPPED INTO TUFFY TAYLOR'S BOAT AND THEY PUSHED OFF, ROWING FRANTICALLY FOR THE SAFETY OF DISTANCE. BILL LOOKED BACK WITH A HEAVY HEART . . .



AND STILL THERE WAS NO EXPLOSION !

Chapter 3. LOST WITHOUT TRACE

FOR CLOSE ON THREE HOURS THE SHIP'S COMPANY WAITED TO BE PICKED UP, KEEPING POSITION SO THAT THEY SHOULD BE FOUND. THE *ROMNEY ROSE* HAD DRIFTED AWAY AND NO EXPLOSION HAD REACHED THE EARS OF HER CREW. THEN AT LAST THE CORVETTE APPEARED.

LOOK, BOYS
... HERE SHE COMES!



THE CORVETTE TOOK THEM ABOARD AND LIEUTENANT KEYNES LISTENED TO BILL'S STORY WITH A WRY LOOK THAT SOMEHOW IRRITATED THE MERCHANT NAVY MAN.

EXPLOSION,
OLD BOY?
WHAT EXPLOSION?



Bomb Alley

TO BILL, THIS AMUSEMENT SEEMED TO INDICATE FRANK DISBELIEF AND WHEN HE HAD FINISHED HIS REPORT, HE GLOOMILY MOVED AWAY. NOT EVEN TUFFY TAYLOR'S SYMPATHY COULD DISPEL HIS BITTER FEELING OF FAILURE.

DON'T TAKE IT SO HARD, BILL. YOU ACTED FOR THE BEST.



LIEUTENANT KEYNES, WITH NO OTHER MOTIVE THAN TO FIND AND SINK THE ROMNEY ROSE FOR THE HAZARD SHE WAS PUT THE CORVETTE ON A SEARCH OF THE MIST-COVERED SEAS...

DOUBLE THE LOOK-OUT!



IN HIS GRIM MOOD, BILL COULD ONLY SEE IN THE NAVY MAN'S ACTION A PATRONISING ATTEMPT TO RECTIFY HIS OWN ERRORS, AND THE THOUGHT RANKLED.

I'LL LAY SIX-TO-FOUR
WE FIND THE OLD DEAR IN TEN MINUTES!



BUT THEY DID NOT FIND THE ROMNEY ROSE. BILL DEVOUTLY HOPED THAT SHE HAD QUIETLY SUNK, WHILE KEYNES' JOCULARITY DID NOTHING TO IMPROVE HIS DEPRESSION.

BILL BORE THE BANTER IN SILENCE. AT LAST, WITH A TYPICAL BREEZY REMARK, KEYNES CALLED OFF THE SEARCH . . .

JUST IMAGINE THE ADMIRAL, OLD BOY. BANG ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH OLD AUNTIE ROSE? TALK ABOUT A SCREAMING OF BRAKES! EEEEN!

WE'D BETTER BEAT IT BACK TO COS. THERE'S A BIT OF A SHEMOZZLE GOING ON THERE.



Bomb Alley

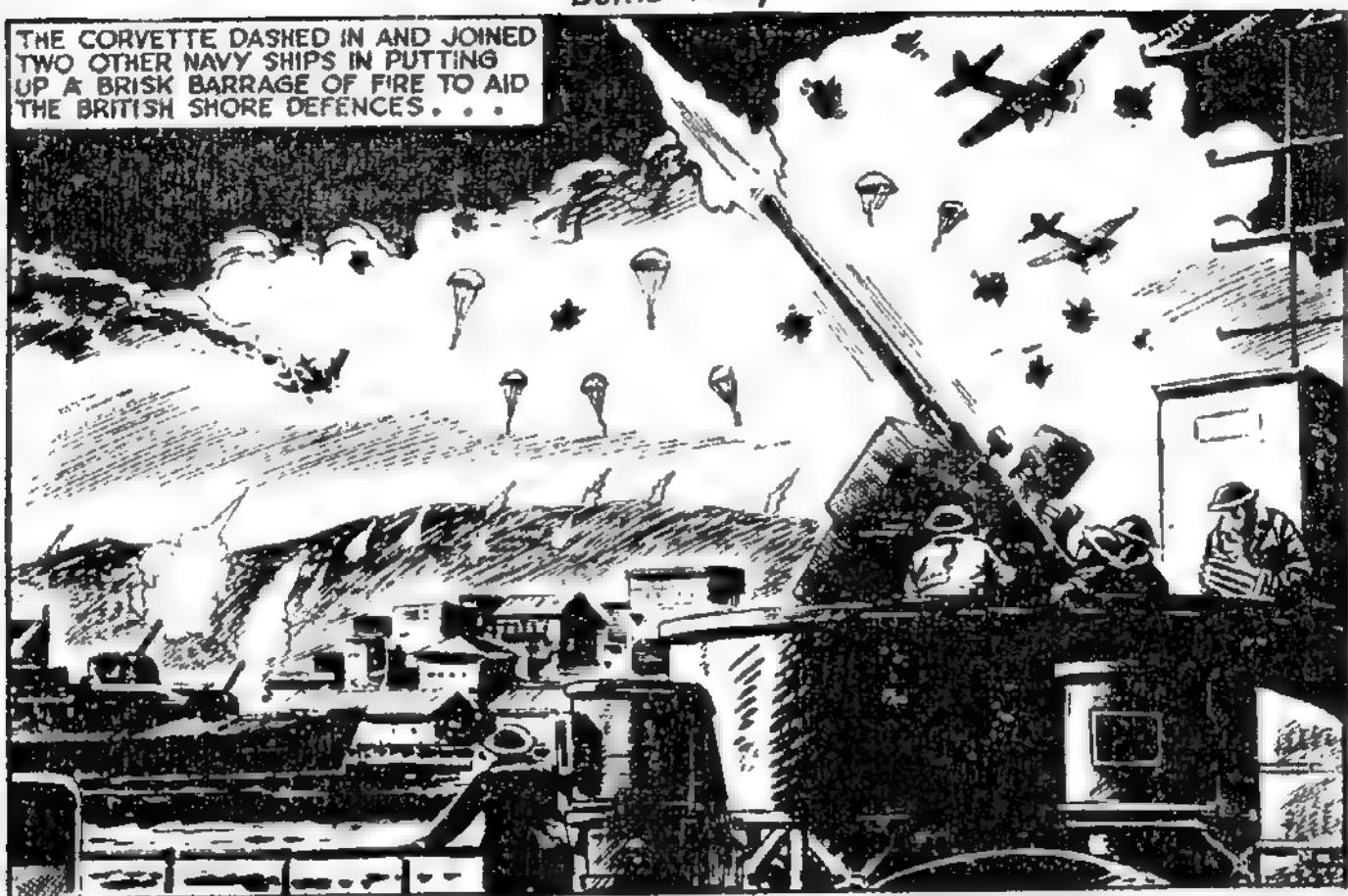
AFTER AN HOUR'S STEAMING, THEY ENTERED THE TINY HARBOUR OF COS TO FIND A BATTLE ROYAL IN PROGRESS . . .



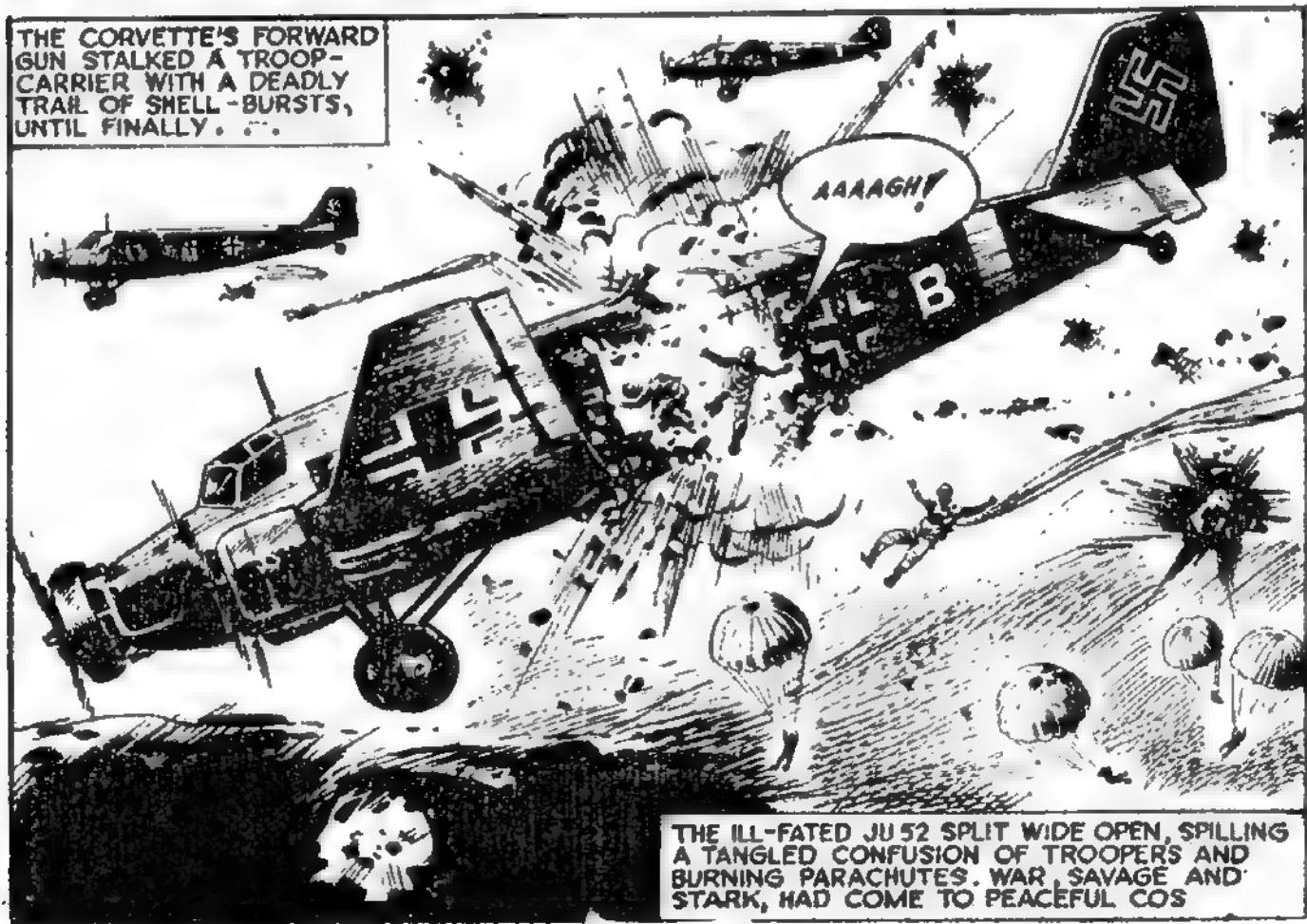
Bomb Alley

33

THE CORVETTE DASHED IN AND JOINED TWO OTHER NAVY SHIPS IN PUTTING UP A BRISK BARRAGE OF FIRE TO AID THE BRITISH SHORE DEFENCES . . .



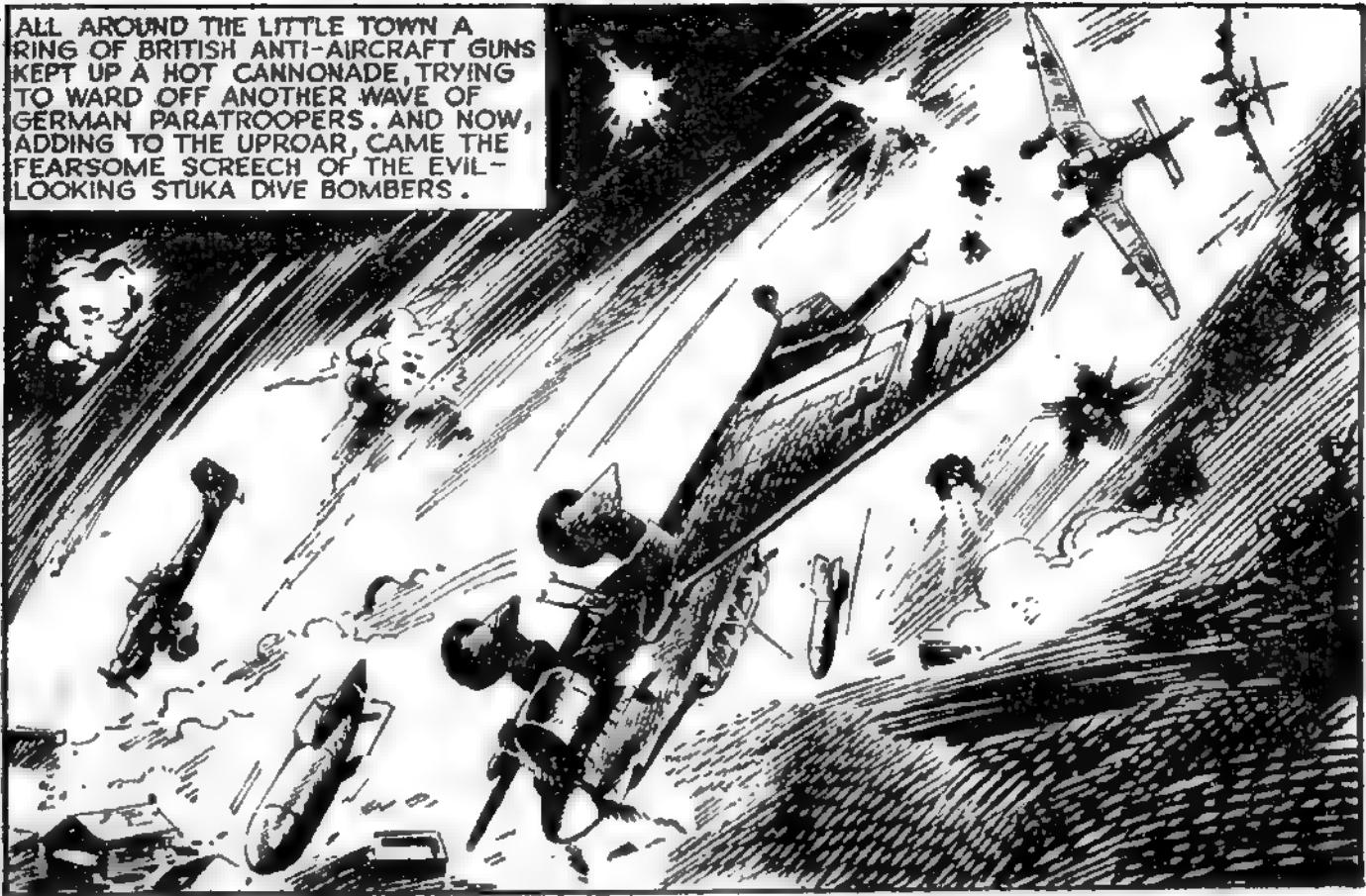
THE CORVETTE'S FORWARD GUN STALKED A TROOP-CARRIER WITH A DEADLY TRAIL OF SHELL-BURSTS, UNTIL FINALLY . . .



THE ILL-FATED JU 52 SPLIT WIDE OPEN, SPILLING A TANGLED CONFUSION OF TROOPERS AND BURNING PARACHUTES. WAR SAVAGE AND STARK, HAD COME TO PEACEFUL COS

Bomb Alley

ALL AROUND THE LITTLE TOWN A RING OF BRITISH ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS KEPT UP A HOT CANNONADE, TRYING TO WARD OFF ANOTHER WAVE OF GERMAN PARATROOPERS. AND NOW, ADDING TO THE UPROAR, CAME THE FEARSOME SCREECH OF THE EVIL-LOOKING STUKA DIVE BOMBERS.



AS IF GALVANISED BY THIS DESPERATE SCENE, BILL SPRANG TO HELP FERRY AMMUNITION ASHORE, HIS EXAMPLE BEING SWIFTLY FOLLOWED BY TUFFY TAYLOR AND OTHERS OF THE ROMNEY ROSE. IT WAS A MOTLEY ASSORTMENT OF CRAFT THAT OFFERED ITSELF FOR THIS DANGEROUS TASK.



ON THE SECOND RUN TO THE SHORE, A BOMB EXPLODED CLOSE BESIDE THE HEAVILY LANDED BOAT AND THE PETTY OFFICER AT THE TILLER WAS FLUNG ASIDE. INSTANTLY, BILL LEAPED FORWARD.



TO AND FRO THE LITTLE CRAFT STAGGERED, THEIR CREWS FRENZIEDLY UNLOADING THE VITAL AMMUNITION AND THEN RETURNING THROUGH BOMB SPATTERED WATER FOR MORE.

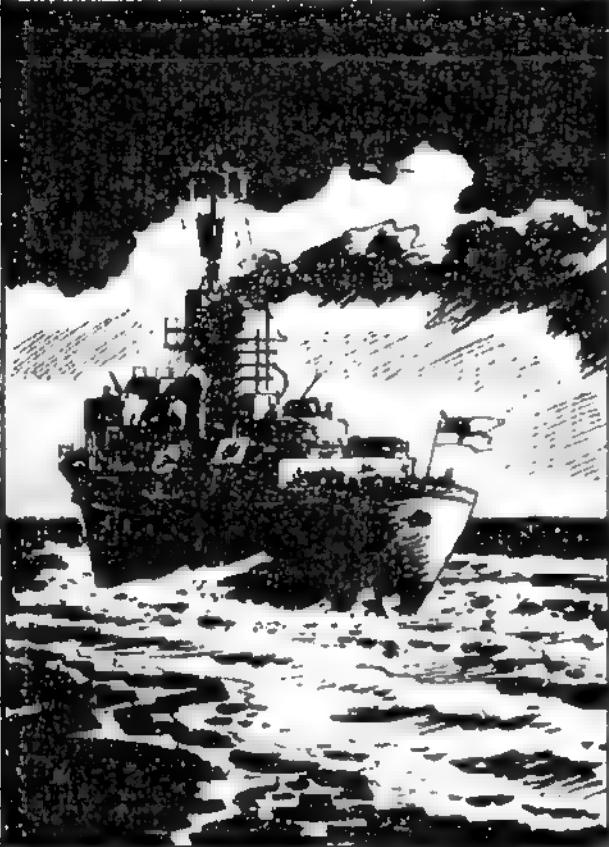
DRENCHED WITH BOMB SPRAY AND WITH THEIR EARS RINGING FROM STUKA ATTACKS BILL AND TUFFY PAUSED IN THEIR BACK-ACHING TASK OF GETTING THE AMMUNITION CASES ASHORE AND ON TO TRUCKS.



BILL KNEW THAT THE ALLIES, IF OUTNUMBERED IN THE AIR, WERE STILL MASTERS OF THE SEAS. THE GERMANS WOULD WAIT TILL DARK BEFORE ATTEMPTING THEIR LANDINGS.

Bomb Alley

LIEUTENANT KEYNES WAS ALSO AWARE OF THIS, AND AS SOON AS HIS AMMUNITION SUPPLIES WERE ASHORE HE CALLED ALL ABOARD AND MOVED OFF TO PATROL THE ISLAND AGAINST ENEMY INVASION. IT WAS NOW DUSK.



ALTHOUGH DOG TIRED FROM HIS EFFORTS, BILL MOVED ANXIOUSLY AMONG THE REMNANTS OF HIS CREW, ASKING NEWS OF THEIR SHIPMATES. NO ONE WAS CERTAIN . . .



KEYNES, WHOSE FIGHTING SPIRIT WAS WELL ROUSED, NOW CAME ALONG IN FINE FETTLE. BILL FELT HE COULD WILLINGLY APPROVE OF THE YOUNG COMMANDER IF HE WERE NOT SO JOCULAR. DID NOTHING SOBER THE MAN?



BILL HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP TO RESPECT THE SEA AND ALL ITS WAYS . . . NEVER TO TAKE IT LIGHTLY. BUT TO KEYNES IT ALL SEEMED A VAST JOKE . . . AND SOMEHOW BILL FELT AFFRONTED BY THIS ATTITUDE.

THE BENT PLATES WERE SHORED UP AND THE CORVETTE SLID QUIETLY THROUGH THE NIGHT WATERS. SUDDENLY, THE LITTLE WARSHIP RANG TO THE CLANGOUR OF ALARM GONGS. AHEAD, A GERMAN LANDING FORCE WAS BEING FERRIED SHOREWARD FROM A PARENT SUPPLY SHIP.



THE CORVETTE OPENED UP WITH A SHATTERING DIN ON THE MULTIPLE MACHINE GUNS AND AT THE SAME TIME HIGH EXPLOSIVE SHELLS CRASHED INTO THE GERMAN SHIP CONVENIENTLY OUTLINED AGAINST THE LAST OF THE DAYLIGHT.



Bomb Alley

BILL SPRANG TO RELIEVE A WOUNDED GUNNER AND FOUND HIMSELF SWINGING THE THUDDING WEAPON WITH CALM PRECISION, APPROVING KEYNES' MANOEUVRING OF THE CORVETTE WHICH ALLOWED HER GUNNERS TO LAY IN TURN.



ONCE AGAIN THE GERMANS WERE PAINFULLY REMINDED OF THE HAZARDS OF A BRITISH-DOMINATED SEA. LASHED BY THE CASCADE OF FIRE, THE FERRIES FALTERED AND THEN SLOWLY SANK, THROWING THEIR CARGO AND PASSENGERS INTO THE SEA.



THE GERMAN PARENT SHIP LIMPED AWAY IN THE DARKNESS AND THE CORVETTE SOUNDED THE 'CEASE FIRE'. THE SUDDEN QUIET THAT FOLLOWED THAT EAR-NUMBING CLAMOUR COULD ALMOST BE FELT. BILL, STILL FEELING STRANGELY CALM, STEPPED BACK FROM THE SMOKING GUNS TO FIND TUFFY TAYLOR GRINNING IN APPROVAL . . .

WELL, IT'S A TREAT TO SEE THE FUN FOR ONCE INSTEAD OF BEING COOPED UP BELOW. GOOD SHOOTING, BILL!

POOR DEVILS . . . THEY HADN'T A CHANCE.

BILL REALISED WITH SUDDEN CLARITY THAT HE WAS NOT CUT OUT FOR A MAN OF WAR. HE LACKED KEYNES' HOT-BLOODED RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE. MAYBE IT WAS A GOOD THING HE HAD STUCK TO THE MERCHANT SERVICE.

SATISFIED THAT THE GERMAN SURVIVORS WOULD DRIFT ASHORE, KEYNES SET OFF ONCE MORE TO LOOK HOPEFULLY FOR A FRESH QUARRY WHILE BILL PACKER AND HIS CREW SNATCHED SOME SLEEP. THEN, IN THE DARK EARLY HOURS . . .

DO MY OLD EYES SEE SHAPES, NUMBER ONE?

I'M SORRY TO DISAPPOINT YOU, SIR, I'M AFRAID THEY'RE FRIENDLY!

Bomb Alley

FEELING RESTLESS, BILL JOINED THE BRIDGE IN TIME TO SEE THE SUB-LIEUTENANT PROVED CORRECT. A WINKING SIGNAL LAMP DECLARED THE NEWCOMERS TO BE A BRITISH DESTROYER AND TWO GUNBOATS MAKING FOR COS WITH MORE MEN AND SUPPLIES.

THEY CAN ONLY BE BRINGING A TRICKLE BUT I SUPPOSE IT'LL HELP.

IT'LL BE NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT THE GERMANS MUST HAVE LANDED TONIGHT!



LISTENING TO THIS, BILL THOUGHT OF THE SUPPLIES LYING IN THE持S OF THE ROMNEY ROSE, ANTI-AIRCRAFT SHELLS ESPECIALLY. THEY MUST BE SORELY NEEDED BY THE ISLAND DEFENDERS.

I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OLD ROMNEY ROSE?

HMS



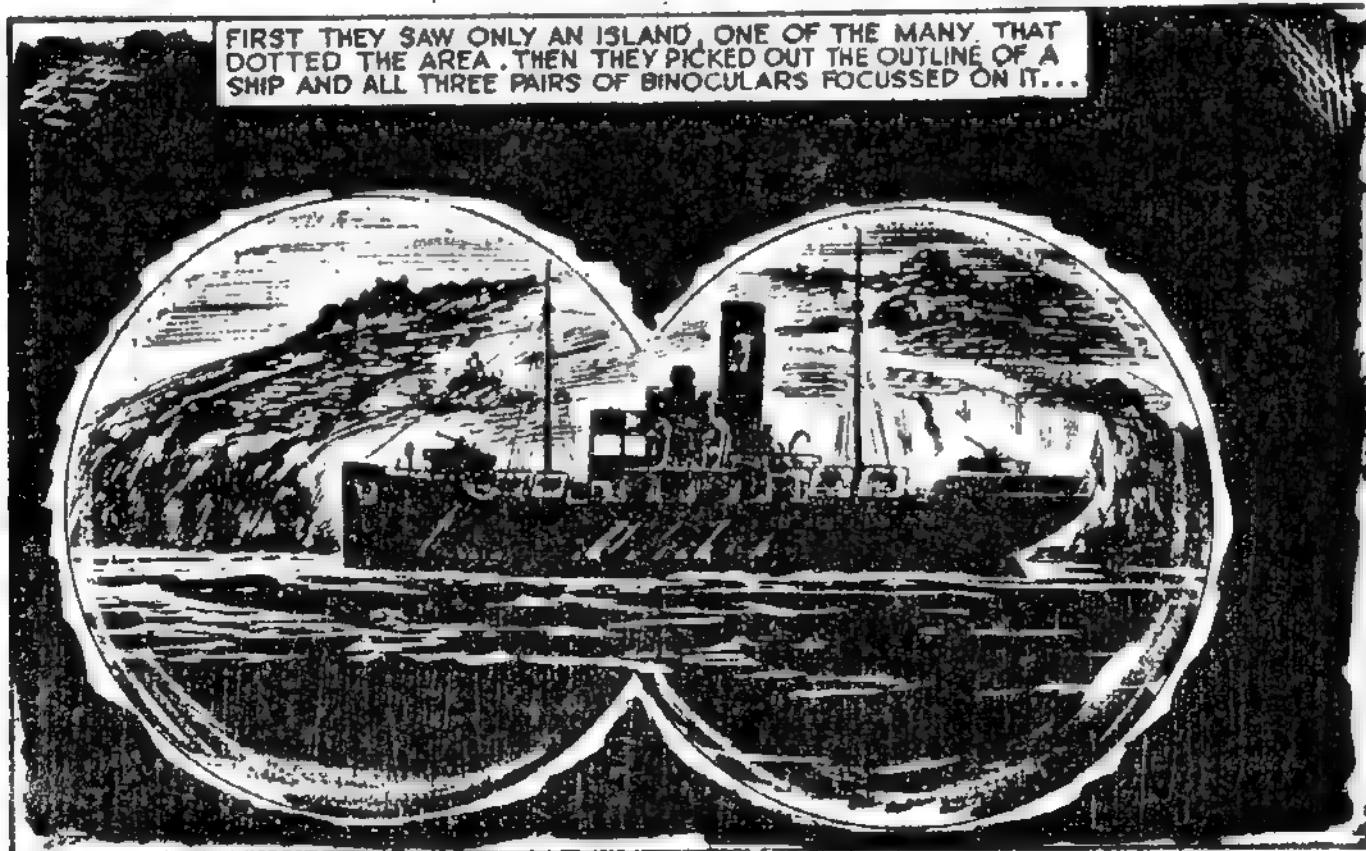
Chapter 4. A GALLANT OLD SHIP

AN HOUR LATER, THE CLOUDS DISPERSED AND A LOW MOON LIT THE SCENE. SUDDENLY, THE CRY OF THE LOOK-OUT REACHED THE OFFICERS ON THE BRIDGE . . .

STARBOARD
NINETY!
UNIDENTIFIED
SHIP, SIR!



FIRST THEY SAW ONLY AN ISLAND, ONE OF THE MANY, THAT DOTTED THE AREA. THEN THEY PICKED OUT THE OUTLINE OF A SHIP AND ALL THREE PAIRS OF BINOCULARS FOCUSED ON IT . . .



A SUDDEN HOWL OF AMUSEMENT BROKE FROM KEYNES. HE SNATCHED DOWN HIS GLASSES AND STARED AT BILL IN DELIGHTED COMPREHENSION . . .

IT'S THE ROMNEY
ROSE, OLD BOY!
HER FIRE'S OUT!

THAT'S RIGHT!
SHE MUST
HAVE DRIFTED
DOWN HERE!

YES, HER FIRE WAS OUT. SHE HAD NOT EXPLODED . . . OR SUNK! ONLY THE HUMAN ELEMENT HAD FAILED.

WHEREAS TO KEYNES, THE NON-PROFESSIONAL, THE SIGHT OF THE TRAMP STUCK INGLORIOUSLY ON THE MUD, AND EVEN MORE, THE LOOK ON POOR BILL'S FACE, SENT THE NAVY MAN INTO OUTBURSTS OF AMUSEMENT.

WELL, BLOW ME, PACKER . . . ALL THAT RUSH AND SCRAMBLE TO GET CLEAR AND DEAR OLD AUNTIE ROSE HAD NO INTENTION OF BLOWING UP AFTER ALL!

FOR TO BILL, THE PROFESSIONAL SAILOR, THIS WAS AN UNFORGIVABLE SIN . . . TO DESERT A SHIP WHEN IT WAS PROVED UNNECESSARY. A SEARING FLUSH STAINED HIS CHEEKS.

BILL LET THE AMUSEMENT BURN ITSELF OUT. THEN HE SPOKE IN CLIPPED TONES . . .

I WANT TO GET TO MY SHIP, KEYNES . . . TO TRY TO FLOAT HER OFF. THERE'S AMMUNITION ON BOARD . . . THEY NEED IT BADLY ON COS. WILL YOU GIVE ME A HAND ?

I'M SORRY, OLD CHAP. . . THERE'S NO TIME FOR SIDE ISSUES .



AFTER SOME PERSUASION, HOWEVER, KEYNES WENT SO FAR AS TO CLOSE WITH THE ROMMEX ROSE AND TO LET BILL HAVE THE SHIP'S BOAT. IN THIS, BILL AND THE REMAINDER OF HIS CREW PULLED AWAY IN SILENCE, EXCHANGING A BRIEF FAREWELL WITH THE CORVETTE WHICH IMMEDIATELY RACED ON HER WAY.



Bomb Alley



WORKING ROUND TO THE SHOREWARD SIDE, THEY SCRAMBLED ABOARD TO FIND THE WELL-DECK A CHARRED RUIN. THE HOLD ITSELF IN THE BALEFUL MOONLIGHT YAWNED BLACK AS A PIT. INSIDE THEY HEARD THE EERIE SWILL OF SEA WATER AS THE SHIP GENTLY ROLLED.



BY MID-MORNING, TUFFY HAD PATCHED THE STEAM PIPING. THE ENGINES WORKED BUT SEVERAL ATTEMPTS TO REFLOAT THE SHIP WERE UNSUCCESSFUL.



Bomb Alley



Bomb Alley

47

WOULD THE GERMANS BELIEVE THE ROMNEY ROSE ABANDONED? AFTER LONG MINUTES OF SCRUTINY, THE GERMAN LAUNCH CAUTIOUSLY NOSED IN . . .

YOU THINK SHE IS DESERTED, HERR HAUPTMANN?

HOW SHOULD I KNOW BLOCKHEAD?



BILL WAITED TENSELY TRYING TO JUDGE WHEN THE BOAT WOULD BE ALONGSIDE. THE SEAMENS FINGERS TIGHTENED ON THEIR TRIGGERS . . .

READY, LADS . . .



Bomb Alley

THE GERMANS WERE ALERT FOR ANY ATTACK BUT WERE STARTLED BY THE SUDDENNESS AND FURY OF IT. BILL AND HIS MEN EMPTIED THEIR GUNS UPON THE HAPLESS SOLDIERS BELOW WITH A VOLLEY OF PARALYSING FIRE.



IN A FEW TERRIBLE MOMENTS, IT WAS OVER. THE SURVIVING GERMANS CRIED SURRENDER AND CLIMBED ABOARD THE ROMNEY ROSE IN SULLEN SILENCE.

KEEP MOVING, FRITZ, WE'RE GONNA CLAP YOU IN IRONS!

THEN WE'LL MAKE YOU WALK THE FLIPPING PLANK, MATE!



AS THE SUN SET, THE WIND AT LAST CHANGED AND BEGAN BLOWING OFF THE ISLAND. THIS TOGETHER WITH THE CAPTURED LAUNCH, HELPED TO PUSH THE SHIP'S STERN INTO DEEPER WATER, BUT THE BOWS STILL HELD FAST. THEN BILL HAD AN IDEA . . .

WHAT ABOUT FLOODING NUMBER FIVE HOLD, TUFFY?

A BONNY IDEA, BILL. IT'LL WEIGH THE STERN DOWN IN THE WATER.





AND SO, IN THE FRIENDLY DARK BEFORE THE MOON ROSE, THE GALLANT OLD SHIP SET OFF TOWARDS THE EMBATTLED ISLAND.

GOSH, YOU CAN HEAR THE BATTLE FROM HERE, SKIPPER!

YES, SOUNDS AS IF IT'S IN THE HARBOUR ITSELF.



STILL DRAGGING A WEIGHTED STERN, THE ROMNEY ROSE STEAMED INTO THE FATEFUL, LITTLE HARBOUR. INTO A FEARFUL SCENE OF DESTRUCTION. GUNS FLICKERED ALONG THE WATERFRONT. THE DRONE OF AIRCRAFT ENGINES WAS PUNCTUATED BY THE CRASH OF EXPLODING BOMBS AND THE LURID GLARE OF BURNING BUILDINGS DANCED ACROSS THE WATER.



Bomb Alley



WITH THE CAPTURED LAUNCH HASTILY FILLED WITH CASES OF AMMUNITION, BILL MADE FOR THE SHORE. BAD AS THE POSITION LOOKED BILL COULD NOT BELIEVE THAT ALL HIS EFFORTS HAD BEEN FOR NOTHING.





Chapter 5. **FIGHTING EXIT**

AMIDST A RAIN OF BOMBS AND SHELLS, THE EVACUATION OF COS WENT ON AND THE *ROMNEY ROSE* AND OTHER SHIPS BEGAN TO FILL WITH SOLDIERS.



THE MEN WERE TIRED AND DIRTY BUT CHIEFLY THEY WERE FIGHTING-MAD AT HAVING TO LEAVE THE ISLAND EVEN IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY'S OVERWHELMING SUPERIORITY OF NUMBERS.

IF ONLY WE'D HAD MORE PLANES!

AND MORE ACK-ACK GUNS!

MORE MEN TOO... AND, AYE, MORE AMMUNITION!



BILL HEARD THIS LAST REMARK WITH A FEELING OF GUILT. THE *ROMNEY ROSE* SHOULD HAVE REACHED COS TWENTY-FOUR HOURS SOONER AND ALL THAT AMMUNITION STILL LAY UNTOUCHED IN HER HOLDS. STILL THE SOLDIERS CLAMBERED OVER THE RAILS . . .



ONE OF BILL'S MEN POINTED TO A SMALL WARSHIP WHICH HAD CRESTED INTO THE HARBOUR. ALREADY SOLDIERS WERE SWARMING ABOARD HER .



Bomb Alley

LIEUTENANT KEYNES' SHIP IT WAS...AND HE WAS HAVING A TROUBLESOME TIME GETTING THE TROOPS ABOARD SO THAT HE COULD MOVE AWAY BEFORE HE WAS SUNK. FOR BY NOW ENEMY LIGHT GUNS HAD FOUND THE CORVETTE'S RANGE.

TELL YOUR MEN TO LOOK SHARP, MAJOR!

COME ON, LADS. HURRY!

GERMAN BOMBERS NOW SWOOPED OUT OF THE NIGHT AND THEIR BOMBS WHISTLED DOWN AT THE SHIPS BELOW. THE HARBOUR SURFACE BEGAN TO LOOK LIKE A POND THRASHED BY HAILSTONES.



LEUTENANT KEYNES HAD NO INTENTION OF LEAVING WITHOUT TAKING EVERY MAN HE COULD OUT OF THAT HOLOCAUST . . . BUT SPEED WAS ESSENTIAL.



HEEDLESS OF THE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION HURTLING DOWN AROUND HIS SHIP, HE URGED THE SOLDIERS ABOARD AND FOR THE MOMENT HIS HUMOUR HAD DISAPPEARED. INSTEAD A HOT RAW COURAGE TOOK ITS PLACE.

BILL'S COURAGE BY CONTRAST WAS COOL AND CALCULATING. BOTH WERE FIGHTERS BUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. AS THE ROMNEY ROSE APPROACHED THE CORVETTE, BILL SOUNDED HER HOARSE OLD SIREN.



HEARING THE SIREN'S INSISTENT BLAST, KEYNES WHIPPED ROUND TO STARE AND GRIN AS HE RECOGNISED THE GAME. OLD FREIGHTER.



Bomb Alley



THE WITS WHICH HAD SO ABLY SERVED YOUNG KEYNES SWIFTLY FOUND AN ANSWER TO HIS SHIP'S PLIGHT. HE SPRANG TO A SIGNALLING LAMP AND BEGAN TO FLASH A SIGNAL TO THE BATTERED ROMNEY ROSE.



BILL'S ANSWER WAS BRIEF AND TO THE POINT...



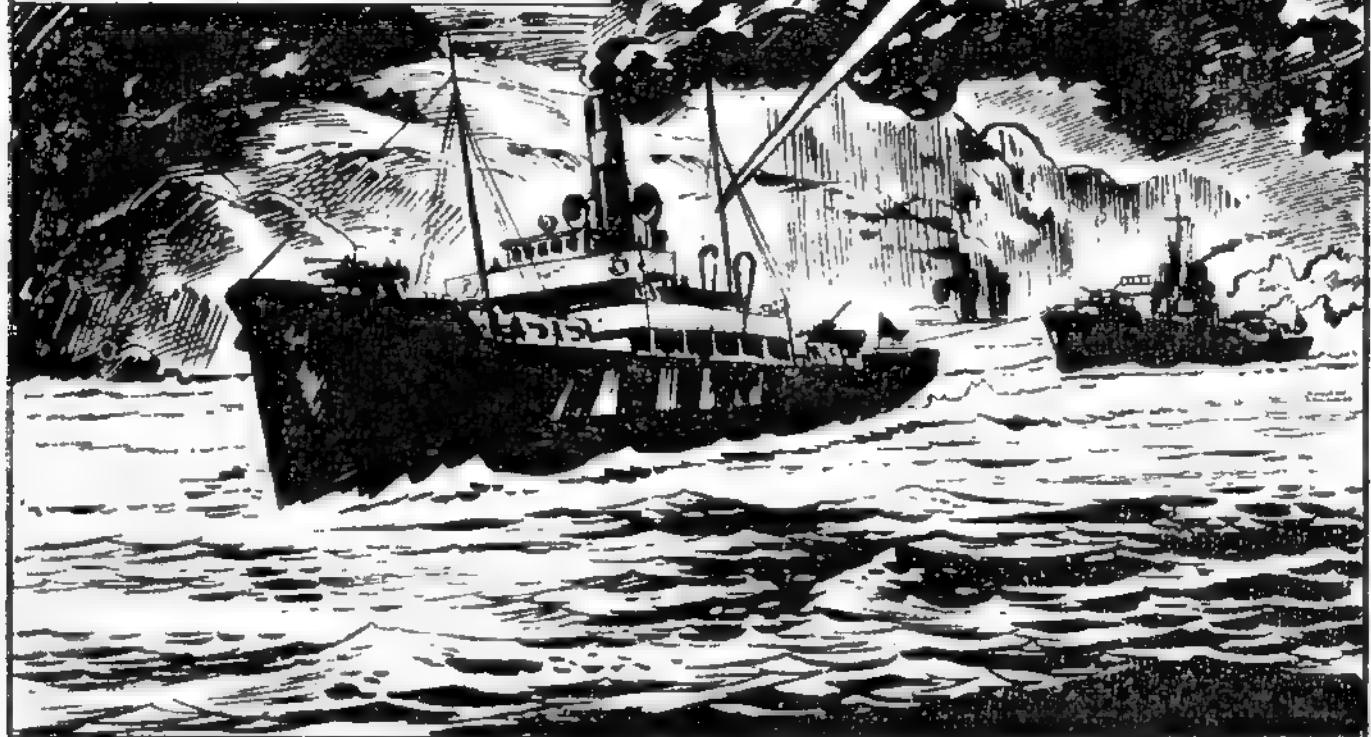
NO MAN MORE ABLY HANDLED A LISTING CROWDED BOAT THAN DID BILL PACKER THAT FANTASTIC NIGHT. IMPERTURBED BY THE INCESSANT ENEMY SHELLING, HE CLOSED THE CORVETTE WHICH STOOD READY WITH THE TOW-LINES.



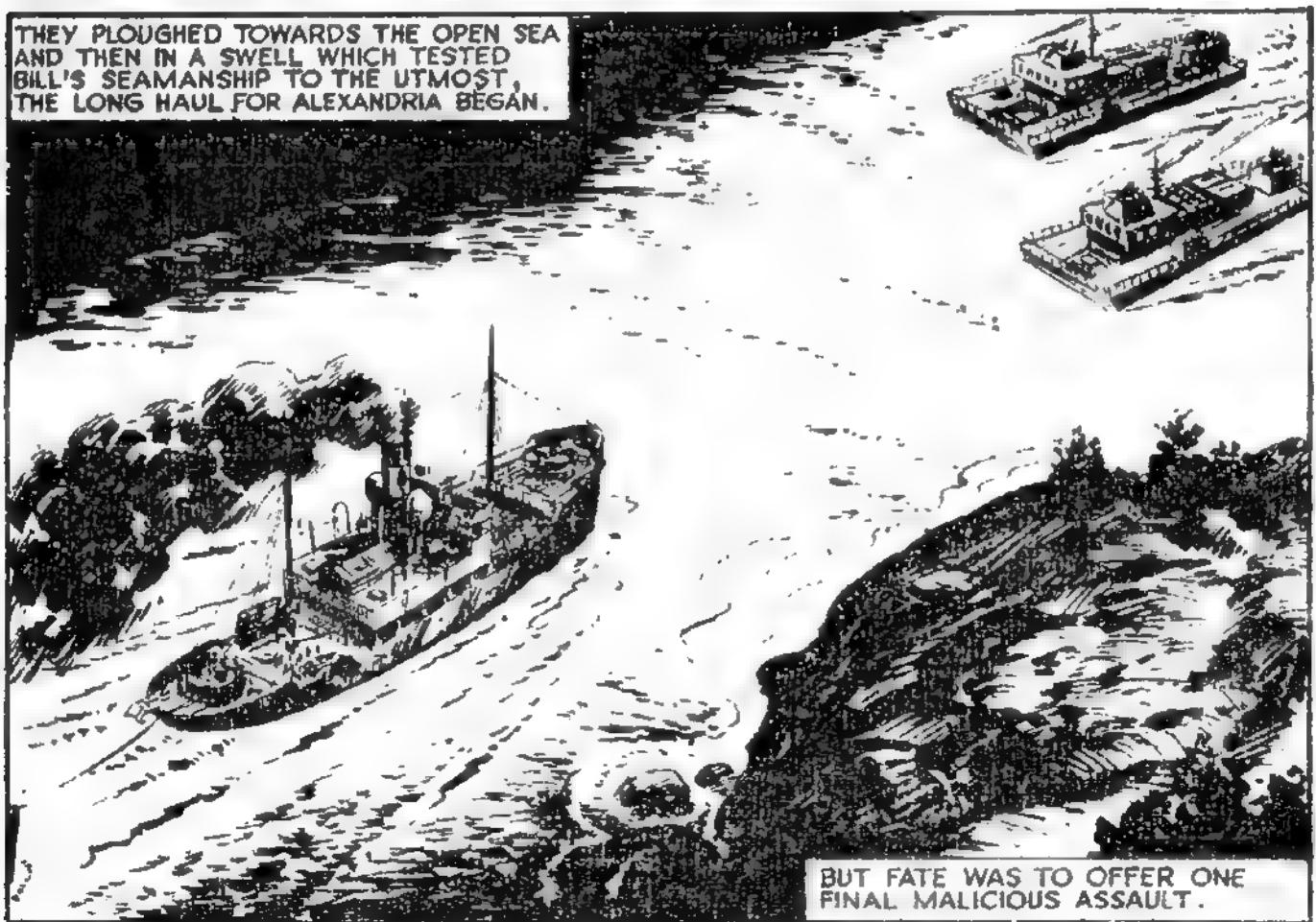
Bomb Alley

LINES WERE SOON ABOARD, FOLLOWED BY A WIRE HAWSER. THEN THEY MOVED OFF PAINFULLY SLOW AT FIRST, BUT AT LEAST THEY WERE MOVING. AMIDST A RENEWED BARRAGE THEY FORGED ON, A TIRED OLD CROCK HAULING A HAM-STRUNG BANTAM.

THAT'S
GRAND, TUFFY!
KEEP IT UP!



THEY PLOUGHED TOWARDS THE OPEN SEA AND THEN IN A SWELL WHICH TESTED BILL'S SEAMANSHIP TO THE UTMOST, THE LONG HAUL FOR ALEXANDRIA BEGAN.



BUT FATE WAS TO OFFER ONE FINAL MALICIOUS ASSAULT.

ROUNDING THE ISLAND HEADLAND THE LIMPING SHIPS FOUND A LINE OF GERMAN LANDING CRAFT CROSSING THEIR BOWS. THE GERMANS CLOSED IN ON THE ROMNEY ROSE AND FORMED A LANE OF MURDEROUS FIRE.

ACHTUNG!
FIRE!



THE TROOPS ON THE ROMNEY ROSE REACTED AS IF SLAPPED IN THE FACE. THEY RUSHED TO THE RAILS AND A TORNADO OF STEEL RIPPED ACROSS THE WATER AT THE ENEMY.

YOU AIN'T BEATEN US!

WE'LL BE BACK TO GIVE YOU A GOOD 'IDING!



Bomb Alley

THE BRITISH LADS KEPT IT UP UNTIL THEIR SCANTY AMMUNITION RAN OUT AND SEEING THE POSITION BILL QUICKLY OPENED UP THE HOLDS AND DEALT OUT THE AMMUNITION LYING THERE AS YET UNTOUCHED. NO LONGER WOULD HE THINK IT WASTED CARGO!



MEANWHILE THE CORVETTE FOLLOWING ASTERN BROUGHT HER OWN GUNS TO BEAR ON THE FALTERING GERMANS. NOW SHAKEN BY THE STINGING FURY OF WHAT HAD LOOKED TO BE EASY PREY, THE CROSS-FIRE FROM THE TWO BRITISH SHIPS BECAME FEARSOME.



CHEERS BROKE OUT FROM THE BRITISH RANKS. THEY HAD HAD A LAST CRACK AT THE GERMANS AND THEY FELT BETTER. LIEUTENANT KEYNES, LISTENING FROM HIS NOW USELESS BRIDGE, GRINNED IN SILENT PRAISE AT THE STEADY SLOGGING ROMNEY ROSE. THE TABLES WERE TURNED WITH A VENGEANCE.

GOOD SHOW,
BILL PACKER!
AND BLESS OLD
AUNTIE ROSE!

HOORAY!

YIPPEE!



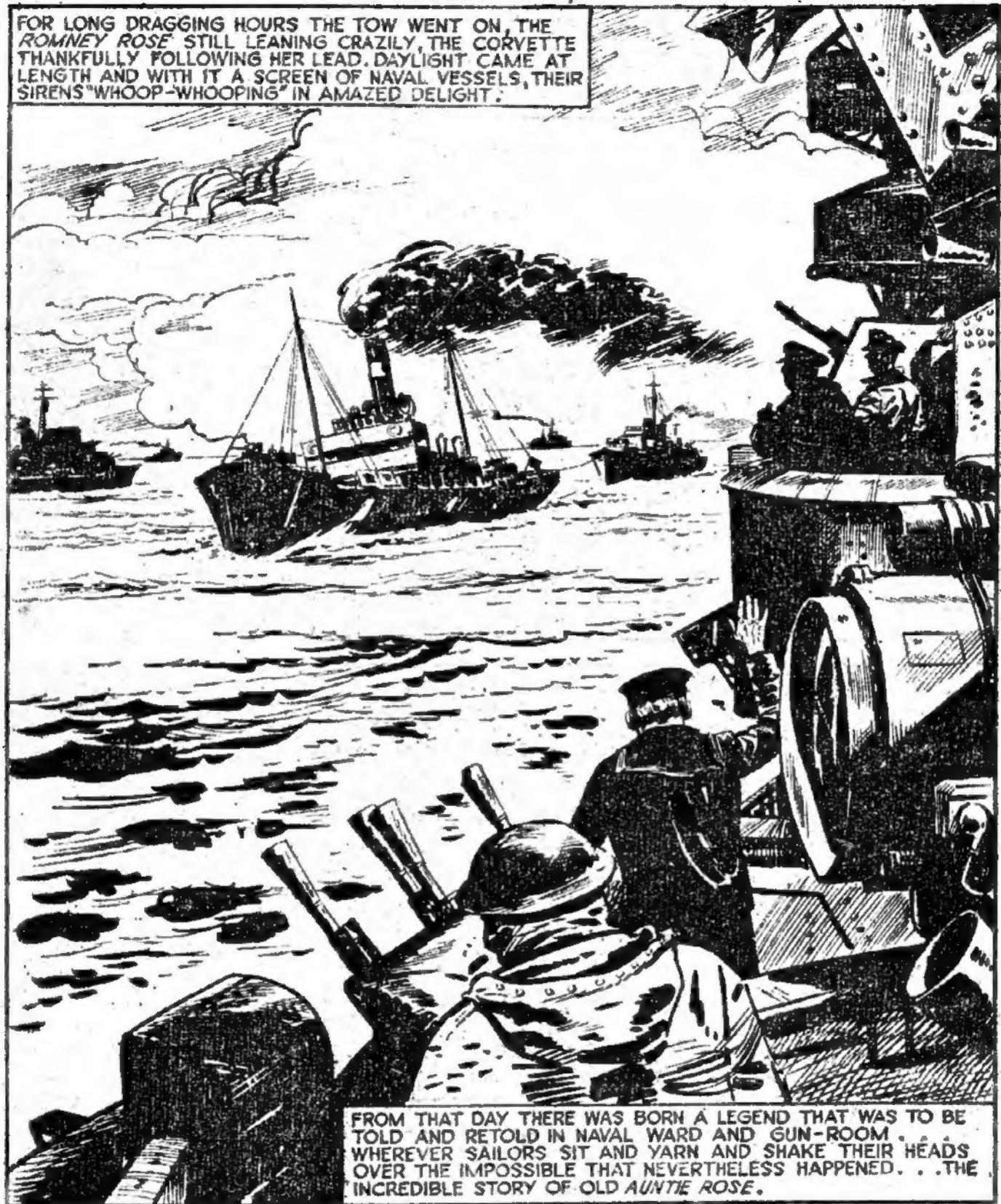
THE DREAD SCARPANTO STRAITS WERE REACHED AND PASSED IN SAFETY THANKS TO THICK CLOUDS THAT BLOTTED OUT THE MOON. BILL PACKER WENT AFT TO INSPECT THE TOW AND HE SAW KEYNES SHOUT SOMETHING AND WAVE HIS CLASPED HANDS ABOVE HIS HEAD IN TOKEN OF ADMIRATION.

I BET THAT
CHARACTER'S SAYING
SOMETHING WITTY.
THERE'S NO GETTING THE
NAVY DOWN WHEN
THERE ARE BLOKES LIKE
HIM IN IT.



Bomb Alley

FOR LONG DRAGGING HOURS THE TOW WENT ON, THE ROMNEY ROSE STILL LEANING CRAZILY, THE CORVETTE THANKFULLY FOLLOWING HER LEAD. DAYLIGHT CAME AT LENGTH AND WITH IT A SCREEN OF NAVAL VESSELS, THEIR SIRENS "WHOOP-WHOOPING" IN AMAZED DELIGHT:



FROM THAT DAY THERE WAS BORN A LEGEND THAT WAS TO BE TOLD AND RETOLD IN NAVAL WARD AND GUN-ROOM. WHEREVER SAILORS SIT AND YARN AND SHAKE THEIR HEADS OVER THE IMPOSSIBLE THAT NEVERTHELESS HAPPENED... THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF OLD AUNTIE ROSE.

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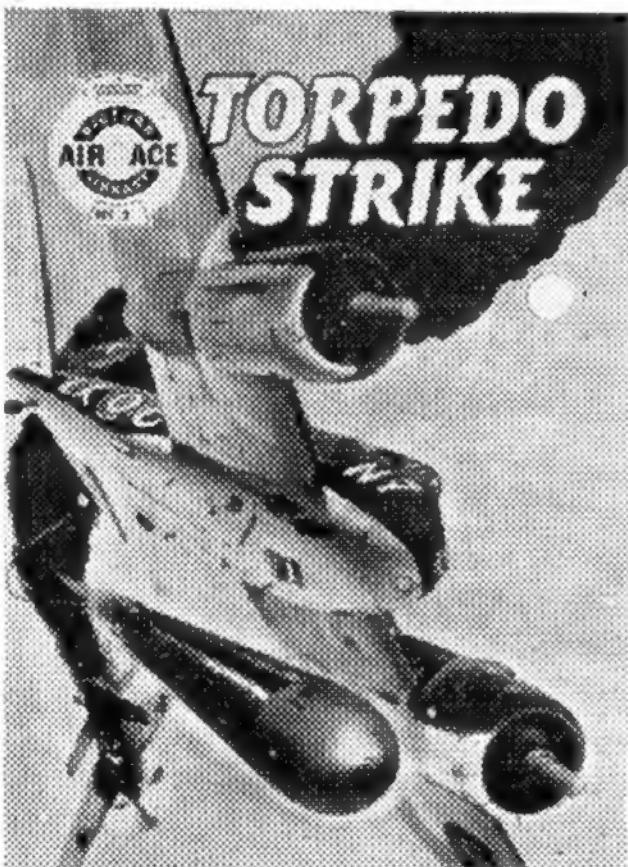
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